Warming Her Pearls

SUMMARY

Against the speaker's skin lies her mistress's pearl necklace. Her mistress directs her to wear it, warming the pearls to bring out their luster, until the evening, when she will brush her mistress's hair. At 6:00 pm, the speaker puts the warmed, shining pearls around her mistress's neck, which is cold and pale. The speaker spends her entire day thinking about her mistress.

Meanwhile, the mistress lounges in a sitting room, thinking about whether she should wear a gown made of silk or taffeta later that night. She fans herself as she ponders these matters. Meanwhile, the speaker works, glad to do so. Her body grows warm as she completes her tasks, and that warmth is gradually transferred to the pearls. The necklace hangs loosely on her neck as if it is a rope belonging to her mistress.

The speaker finds her mistress beautiful. Confined to servants' quarters in the attic, she lies in bed, dreaming of her mistress. The speaker imagines that the mistress is dancing with tall men, who are confused by conflicting aromas. Beneath her mistress's French perfume, the speaker's subtle but persistent scent lingers, having been transferred to her mistress along with the pearls, which gleam like creamy jewels.

As the speaker applies powder to her mistress's shoulders with a rabbit's foot, she watches her mistress's skin take on a soft pink hue, gently, like casually letting out a sigh. The speaker looks at herself in her mistress's mirror and her flushed mouth opens slightly, as if she wishes to speak.

The speaker's mistress rides home in a carriage as a full moon shines outside. The speaker pictures every movement her mistress makes: she undresses, then removes her jewelry, places the pearls into their case with her slender hand, and slips into bed naked.

She does this every night, the speaker imagines. While her mistress sleeps, the speaker lies awake, thinking about the pearls, which are now getting cold since no one is wearing them. Without an object into which she can channel her fiery passion, the speaker burns with lust and frustration all through the night.

THEMES

UNREQUITED LOVE AND FANTASY

"Warming Her Pearls" tells the story of a maid, or female servant, who secretly pines for her mistress day and night. She delights in wearing her mistress's pearls, warming them to bring out their luster before her mistress wears them. The poem is presumably set in the British Victorian era, the period from 1837-1901 when Queen Victoria reigned and same-gender relationships were forbidden—they were both taboo and punishable by law. If the speaker were to vocalize her feelings to her mistress, she would almost definitely face rejection due to both her gender and her low social standing. The speaker distances herself from that fraught reality by sexually idealizing her mistress and concealing her desires in order to preserve her fantasy.

The speaker romanticizes her mistress, inventing a version of her that is compatible with the speaker's own desires. The speaker fixates on her mistress's physical form by ruminating on various parts of her body, such as "her hair," "her cool, white throat," and "her slim hand." The speaker visualizes her mistress's body and imagines what she might be doing, but almost never considers what she might be thinking or feeling. The speaker mentions her mistress's thoughts only once, and she imagines them to be frivolous; she is pictured "contemplating silk or / taffeta," trying to decide which dress to wear. And when the speaker envisions what her mistress is doing, she imbues her with sexual purity that is perhaps unrealistic. For example, the speaker pictures her mistress her "slipping naked into bed" alone and claims that this is what she "always" does. She also thinks of her mistress "dancing / with tall men" but refuses to believe that she would go any further with her suitors. The speaker knows enough about her mistress's routines to create a realistic sketch of her activity, but she is careful to whitewash her mistress's sexuality so that she remains a suitable canvas onto which the speaker can project her own fantasies.

The speaker admitting her sexual desires would in many ways stifle those desires (since she would likely be fired and thus separated from her mistress), so she chooses to hide her true feelings. The speaker does not accompany her mistress into the Yellow Room, at parties, or in her bedroom as she sleeps. Instead, she pictures moments that she clearly is not meant to see. This casts phrases like "I watch" and "I see" in a voyeuristic light, as the speaker finds observing her mistress without her knowledge sexually gratifying. If the speaker were to reveal herself, the arousal she feels as a result of her voyeurism would dissipate. The speaker's suppression of her true desires becomes most apparent when her "red lips part as though [she wants] to speak," as she observes her mistress's beauty in a mirror. By not speaking in this moment—and by not even genuinely *wanting* to speak—the speaker avoids rejection.

In the above ways, the speaker constructs a romanticized reality that is consistent with her sexual fantasies. In doing so, she refuses to acknowledge aspects of both her mistress and

her own desires that might challenge or contradict those fantasies. As such, the speaker becomes increasingly consumed by the alternate reality she has created and desperate to keep the illusion intact.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

CLASS AND INEQUALITY

During the Victorian era, domestic work was a common profession among poverty-stricken women and girls, who worked long hours for little pay and were looked down upon by the wealthy families they served. The period was also characterized by great social austerity, under which female sexuality and same-gender love were dismissed as symptoms of depravity. The speaker of "Warming Her Pearls" resists the vilification and erasure of marginalized people during the Victorian era by calling out socioeconomic injustices and illustrating that disadvantaged people have individual perspectives and concerns.

The speaker repeatedly contrasts her mistress's way of life with her own, calling attention specifically to class-based inequality. Throughout "Warming Her Pearls," the speaker places images of her own labor next to those of her mistress's leisure. For example, she says of her mistress, "All day I think of her, / resting in the Yellow Room." Shortly thereafter she notes that her mistress "fans herself / whilst [the speaker works] willingly." As the speaker spends her days and evenings completing various duties and waiting on her mistress, her mistress doesn't seem to do much of anything at all. And while the speaker is constantly concerned with her mistress's needs, her mistress thinks of trivial matters like which dress she should wear.

The speaker's monologue is also peppered with references to the opulent objects that fill the estate—gowns, "jewels," a "looking-glass"—which stand in contrast to her own meager belongings—an "attic bed." And as she lies in it, the speaker thinks of the "French perfume" her mistress is wearing and the "carriage" she rides in. By juxtaposing the vastly different day-to-day experiences of herself and her mistress—two women living under the same roof—the speaker calls attention to the oppressive nature of class stratification in the Victorian era.

Additionally, the speaker elevates her own personal point of view, proving that working-class people have rich, dynamic inner lives and individual concerns. The speaker constantly reminds the reader that the poem's events largely take place in her own head. She uses phrases like "I think," "I dream," and "I see [...] in my head" to introduce scenes, indicating that her perspective is the lens through which these events should be understood. The poem is undoubtedly a representation of the speaker's reality; she states her opinions, such as "She's beautiful," as fact.

The speaker also provides rich descriptions of her feelings, which she otherwise is forced to conceal due to strict social norms. She covertly studies her mistress's body and memorizes her movements. Internally, she uses this information to dream about her mistress all day and lies awake "burning" for her all night. Even the speaker's domestic duties have layered meanings for her. She relishes the act of warming her mistress's pearls and proudly transfers her scent to her mistress.

The speaker's story proves that underneath the surface, working-class people like domestic servants have distinct points of view and therefore cannot be written off as one broad, monolithic group with the same goals and motivations. At the same time, her account calls attention to the vast socioeconomic disparities that ravage the working class. In doing so, the speaker's monologue humanizes the marginalized, pushing back against the restrictive gender- and class-based standards that otherwise silence her and many others.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Next to my ...
... cool, white throat.

The poem opens with an image of the pearls that the speaker wears and warms at the behest of her mistress. The speaker notes that in the evening she grooms her mistress and transfers the pearls from her own neck to that of her mistress, readying her for a night out.

Throughout the poem, the pearls are an important symbol of the speaker's relationship to her mistress, and the speaker uses several techniques to center them within a strong image at the poem's opening. For example, the meter begins irregularly:

Next to my own skin, her pearls.

Both possessive terms—"my" and "her"—are unstressed while the nouns they describe receive stress, creating a parallel pattern that encourages a comparison between the speaker's skin and her mistress's pearls by placing them side by side, on equal footing. The initial caesura between "skin" and "her" also allows them to literally sit "next to" one another, as the poem describes, creating juxtaposition between the two phrases. The skin belongs to the speaker, emphasizing her physicality, while the pearls she wears belong to her mistress, associating her with wealth and luxury. This image sets up the contrast between the two women and begins to shape their dynamic.

The second caesura contains the initial image so that it is short and cogent.

Over the next two lines, the meter becomes regular, settling into trochaic pentameter, meaning that there are 10 syllables in each line following a stressed-unstressed DA-dum DA-dum pattern:

bids me | wear them, | warm them, | until | evening

The steady rhythm begins to build momentum, drawing the reader into the poem. To do so, the speaker uses asyndeton, omitting a conjunction between "wear them" and "warm them" so that the rhythm is unbroken. Furthermore, the asyndeton results in the immediate repetition of /w/, /r/, and /m/ sounds, which exaggerates the meter and creates sonic interest.

This is part of a larger trend of repeating sounds that complement one another, an effect known as euphony, which can be observed in the many soft /m/, /n/, and /l/ sounds, which give the poem a delicate, airy atmosphere. Sibilance, a hissing effect caused by repeating /s/ sounds (such as "mistress bids"), as well as internal rhymes ("her pearls" and "wear […] hair"), also help to build this lyrical, harmonious mood.

Much like in line 1, the meter becomes irregular in this stanza's concluding line, driving home the final image with three long stresses:

round her cool, white throat.

This description is important because it builds contrast between the two women by creating juxtaposition the mistress's cool skin and the speaker's warm skin, which will become a key symbol in the coming lines.

Finally, the enjambed breaks between these first lines introduce a structural trend—all of the lines are about the same length and are arranged into quatrains, so they appear organized and neat on the page. However, the speaker breaks the lines mid-sentence or mid-clause, where someone reading aloud would not typically pause, creating erratic fragmented sentences. The sentences are even further divided by the caesurae that this structure necessitates and the speaker uses freely. This internal chaos, exacerbated by the regimented standards (that is, the tidy quatrains) to which it must conform, mirrors the speaker's struggle to suppress her desires in accordance with social expectations. In other words, she looks calm and collected from the outside, but like these lines, she's in turmoil on the inside.

LINES 4-8

All day I ...
... neck, her rope.

As the speaker describes how she and her mistress each spend their days, the meter becomes trochaic once again, its momentum helping to bridge the first and second stanzas. Line 4 (which ends "All day I think of her") has one more syllable than the previous three lines do, so it appears to stretch out like the long days the speaker spends thinking of her mistress. The mid-sentence stanza break contributes to this effect, as it gives the appearance of prolonged action unfolding over time and space.

As the speaker works, she pictures her mistress lounging in the sitting room and speculates as to what she might be thinking about. The speaker decides that the mistress is probably trying to determine what to wear later that evening, asking herself, "which gown tonight?" The speaker uses the term "contemplating" to describe her mistress's careful consideration of the matter, subtly mocking her vapid concerns. The rhetorical question emphasizes the low stakes of those concerns, as its answer has no impact on the poem's events. Thus, the speaker indirectly belittles her mistress by suggesting that her thoughts lack substance, especially as the speaker juxtaposes them with her own preoccupations—intense longing and concern for her mistress—which she spends much of the poem detailing, suggesting that they are legitimate and worthy of consideration. By denying her mistress intellectual and emotional depth, the speaker creates a version of her mistress that is compatible with her sexual fantasies; if the mistress doesn't *have* deep thoughts or feelings, then there's nothing to complicate or contradict the speaker's own intense desires.

The speaker then sets up another, related juxtaposition between her own hard work and her mistress's leisure. She uses the comparison to add symbolic depth to the idea of temperature, which came up in the first stanza when she mentioned the mistress's "cool" throat. In the second stanza, the speaker's mistress "fans herself," taking care to remain cool and carefree, while the speaker herself (with her "slow heat") is hot from both her physical labor and her eager sexual excitement. As the speaker describes gradually channeling this heat into her mistress's pearls, the poem's rhythm slows down due to a high concentration of long syllables that receive metrical stress: "my slow heat entering / each pearl." The slant rhyme between "heat" and "each" and the enjambment at the end of line 7 (after "slow heat entering") play up the leisurely, drawn-out pace to match the speaker's warmth—the words sound like a representation of her desires. In this moment, the pearls become a vehicle for the speaker's passion.

At the conclusion of stanza two, the meter shifts abruptly, becoming jerky:

each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

The short syllables read as terse, especially in light of the soothing rhythm that precedes them, and the caesura and end-stop contribute to its lurching rhythm. Whereas soft sibilant, /w/, and /l/ sounds dominate the rest of the stanza, the consonance of hard /k/ ("slack" and "neck") and /p/ ("pearl" and

"rope") sounds give this description a harsh feel, matching the implicit violence of its image. The "rope" that the speaker refers to acts as the first of two metaphors for the pearls, adding nuance to the relationship dynamics between the speaker and her mistress. When the speaker compares the pearls to a rope around her neck, she insinuates that it is an instrument that her mistress uses to dominate and control her, reinforcing the power differences between them. At the same time, it also ties them together, which presumably excites the speaker.

LINES 9-12

She's beautiful. I ...
... her milky stones.

Throughout the poem's third stanza, the speaker imagines what her mistress is up to that evening as the speaker herself lies in bed. Whereas the speaker's earlier account consists of fragmented images suspended ambiguously in time, this quatrain begins with a direct statement: "She's beautiful." A caesura concludes and distinguishes this sentence, adding to its authoritative force. The straightforwardness of the statement imparts clarity, grounding the reader to within an otherwise dreamy atmosphere. This stanza contains two examples of asyndeton, "I dream about her / in my attic bed; picture her dancing" and "her French perfume, her milky stones." The lack of conjunctions lets the narrative flow from one image into another, returning to a surreal, rapturous mood; it's as if the speaker is so overcome with emotion that she can't quite perceive the contours of reality.

Once again, juxtaposition calls attention to the class disparity between the speaker and the mistress she serves. The speaker lies in her modest "attic bed" while her mistress socializes, presumably at an elite event. The speaker's natural body odor lingers on her mistress's skin, competing with her mistress's "French perfume." Line 11, in which the speaker describes her own scent as "faint" and "persistent," is the longest of the stanza, and the text projects slightly further than any other line. The enjambment that comes after "scent" heightens this effect, mirroring the persistence of the speaker's aroma, which recalls her "slow heat" and can be interpreted as a manifestation of her passion for her mistress. The internal rhyme within "persistent scent" also resonates with "French," subtly reinforcing the contrast between the mistress's refined scent and the speaker's simpler one. Meanwhile, other internal (near) rhymes—such as "bed [...] men" and "by my"—and repeating sounds continue the dreamy, lyrical euphony that characterizes the poem's ambiance.

The pearl symbol reemerges at the end of the stanza in the form of "milky stones." This metaphor makes the necklace feel pedestrian and unexciting, like a string of murky pebbles. Perhaps the speaker is insinuating that the "tall men" with whom her mistress dances do not appreciate their beauty. Or perhaps the speaker does not *want* them to find the pearls enticing. Indeed, the speaker seems to impart her own sexuality to the pearls via the sexual overtones of the descriptor "milk," and she also highlights her own commonness via their portrayal as plain "stones." Therefore, just as she fantasizes about her scent confusing the men, she uses the pearls to insert herself into the scene, claiming their wearer for herself—even though she hasn't actually revealed her feelings to her mistress.

LINES 13-16

I dust her ...
... want to speak.

Stanza four marks another shift in time, as the speaker is pictured powdering her mistress's shoulders, presumably before the event described in the previous section. She uses the foot of a rabbit to do so—their shape and texture make them ideal for applying makeup, and they were commonly used for this purpose in Victorian times. The soft, sensuous image of fur against naked skin gives the scene sexual charge, at least from the speaker's point of view.

While this quatrain's first line is written in iambic pentameter, the pace slows in line 14 to reflect the blush's gradual spread across her mistress's skin:

> I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
> watch the soft blush seep through her skin

The string of three stresses ("soft blush seep") is striking, especially given the bouncy meter that precedes them and the choppy meter that follows. Plus, the near rhymes between "dust" and "blush" as well as "watch" and "soft" exaggerate the stresses, significantly slowing the poem's rhythm to accentuate the slow, sensual "seep" of the blush.

The speaker then compares the blush filtering through her mistress's skin to "an indolent sigh," indicating laziness. This simile reinforces the perception that her mistress is idle—both physically inactive and intellectually/emotionally vacant. The speaker conveys that she, herself, is active when she catches her reflection in her mistress's mirror and describes her "red lips [parting] as though [she wants] to speak." In contrast to her mistress's artificial blush, the natural redness of the speaker's lips indicates that she is more vibrantly alive and aware than her mistress is. This imagery resonates with the temperature symbolism that appears elsewhere in the poem, which suggests that the speaker is hot from her labors and brimming with passion while her mistress is inactive. However, the speaker is unable to voice her overwhelming desire, as doing so would put her livelihood and social standing at risk, likely resulting in her separation from her mistress—the object of those desires.

This stanza has the highest concentration of sibilance, including multiple /f/, /th/, and /sh/ sounds (in words like "shoulders" and "soft"). Its euphonic quality is bolstered by internal rhymes— "I" with "sigh," "skin" with "in," "glass" with "as," and "foot" with

"look"—as well as the near rhymes mentioned above. Compared to the rest of the poem, this stanza has a surprising lack of internal punctuation, or caesura, and only two of its lines are enjambed, yielding a sense of lyrical flow. It is also the only stanza that consists of one uninterrupted, self-contained scene. As a result, this section of the poem reads as particularly calm, coherent, and grounded in reality. It is therefore fitting that the scene describes the speaker's inability to express her true feelings. The reference to the looking-glass, which is associated with truth and self-knowledge, gestures to this idea. Although she may get swept away by fantasy (and indeed, she spends most of the poem doing exactly that), the speaker's reality is one of obedience and suppression, and this stanza makes that reality plain to the reader.

LINES 17-21

Full moon. Her ...
... she always does....

The poem's penultimate stanza opens with a strong, gripping image: "Full moon." The speaker goes on to picture her mistress riding home in a carriage and undressing before bed, including removing the pearls.

While the meter throughout the remainder of this section strictly alternates between stressed and unstressed syllables, it begins with a spondee:

Full moon. | Her car- | riage brings | her home. | I see

The initial stressed syllables give the description weight and authority, while the line's caesurae create two short, direct sentences that transport the reader to a new time and place. Their clarity and simplicity ground the reader and reassert the speaker's credibility by providing a concrete backdrop for the slew of abstract, imagined images to come. Two ellipses give the appearance of drifting off into space and back out, distinguishing the literal setting from the speaker's imagined reverie (which lasts from "Undressing" to "she always does").

Several poetic devices work together to build a dreamy atmosphere for the speaker's fantasies. Caesurae create distinct images to represent each of her mistress's actions, such as "taking off her jewels" and "slipping naked into bed." Asyndeton seamlessly links those images together, placing them side by side so that each one flows into the next, following the speaker's drifting thoughts.

Additionally, chronological ambiguity results from repeating "-ing" endings, which create a sense of ongoing action; it's as if the speaker is constantly imagining versions of these same actions, rather than actually perceiving the real timeline of her mistress's routine . The dramatic stanza break on an enjambed line (line 20, which ends "the way") heightens this effect, as the sentence appears to meander down the page, just like the speaker's thoughts meander. The chorus of "-ing's" also creates a pleasant sonic atmosphere, complimenting the continued sibilance. Rhyming pairs of words, like "moon" with "move" and "bed" with "head," contribute to the euphony, as does the as assonant long /a/ sound, which works with consonant /k/ ("taking," "case," "naked"), /w/, and /y/ sounds ("way," "always") to create rhyme. All of these carefully employed devices enhance the sense that the speaker is living in a coherent dreamworld, where everything goes together perfectly.

LINES 21-24

And I lie ...
... and I burn.

As the speaker's monologue draws to a close, she describes lying awake at night, tortured by the thought of the pearls growing cold after being set aside by her sleeping mistress. An ellipsis after "she always does" denotes a return from the speaker's imagination, back to the unromantic reality of her "attic bed." The end-stop in line 21 (after "lie here awake") and the internal rhyme within "I lie" give this initial image force, transporting the reader instantly. Still, the long /a/ and hard /k/ sounds in "awake" resonate with the slant rhymes of the preceding dream sequence (in words like "taking" and "naked"), and sibilant sounds permeate through the stanza to the very end. These sonic connections to the speaker's fantasies provide a sense of continuity, suggesting that even when the speaker is grounded in reality, an element of imagination remains.

The language in this section is very concrete—rather than "I think" or "I dream," the speaker says, "I lie here awake, / knowing[.]" The sentence structure is conventional as well, hinting at a return to reality. The enjambment at the end of line 22 (after "cooling even now") emphasizes the endless hours that the speaker spends awake fixating on the pearls, as the line lacks a definite ending.

Directly after describing herself lying awake, the speaker says, "my mistress sleeps," juxtaposing her own restlessness with her mistress's untroubled slumber. In doing so, the speaker reinforces the earlier depiction of her mistress as carefree and idle, in contrast to the speaker, who has taxing responsibilities and overwhelming desires. She also sets up a comparison between the "cooling" pearls and her own "burning" desires. The pearls provide the speaker with an outlet for her all-consuming feelings, which she channels into the pearls with the heat of her body. The pearls later transfer that heat to her mistress's flesh, so when her mistress is wearing them, the speaker knows that her passion *is* reaching her mistress, however subtly. Therefore, when her mistress casts the pearls aside, their connection is broken and the idea of the dissipating heat torments the speaker. By concluding the poem with this image of the pearls' "absence," the speaker subtly insinuates that she is stuck in a perpetual state of obsessive frustration.

In the final line, a rare conjunction wins out over asyndeton, making for a clear and undeniable statement: "I feel their

absence and I burn." In light of the dreamy atmosphere, fragmented sentences, and meandering thoughts that pervade the rest of the poem, the final line's straightforwardness gives it great authority. Its strength is reinforced by its brevity; this line, snugly contained by the final end-stop, is significantly shorter than those that precede it.

Furthermore, both phrases that cap the final two lines and bookend the poem's last sentence—"all night" and "I burn"—receive two metrical stresses in a row, increasing their weight and providing a sense of completion:

> in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night
> I feel their absence and I burn.

This firm conclusion implies that, for all her dreams and intense passion, the speaker is ultimately still constrained by the rigid norms of her society. She's unable to express how she really feels, so the force of that repressed emotion threatens to consume her like a fire.

SYMBOLS

PEARLS

The pearl necklace that the speaker's mistress tasks her with wearing represents their connection, serving as an unsteady bridge between them. The pearls are the focal point of the poem and the speaker's varied descriptions of them subtly reveal the complexities of the two women's relationship. They are presented as "her pearls" in the poem's title and in its first line, immediately establishing that the speaker's mistress owns the pearls, while the speaker herself wears them in service of her mistress. The speaker expresses that they feel like her mistress's "rope" that is "slack on [her] neck," a means of ownership and control. In these contexts, the precious "jewels" act as a status symbol that exemplifies the class disparity between the speaker and the mistress.

However, the speaker downgrades the pearls later in the poem, calling them "milky stones." The pearls contain a faint trace of the speaker (her "persistent scent"), and her description here imbues them with both her sexuality ("milky") and her commonness ("stones"). Here, the speaker uses the pearls to assert and defend their bond in the presence of her mistress's potential suitors. Perhaps most importantly, the pearls allow the speaker to express her unspoken feelings for her mistress. She daydreams about her mistress while she works, generating body heat that the pearls absorb and later transfer to her mistress. The speaker cherishes the pearls and channels her desires into them, as they are her only outlet for these feelings, which otherwise "burn" within her.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pearls"
- **Line 2:** "them," "them"
- **Line 3:** "them"
- **Line 8:** "each pearl," "her rope"
- **Line 12:** "milky stones"
- **Line 19:** "jewels"
- **Line 22:** "pearls"
- **Line 24:** "their"

TEMPERATURE

Throughout the poem, temperature acts as a symbol for both the speaker's intense desire and the deep differences between her and her mistress. The speaker's warmth, which she mentions several times, is a result of both her physical labor as a domestic servant and her burning desire for her mistress. Her mistress's coldness, on the other hand, results from a carefree lifestyle. She hardly lifts a finger and according to the speaker, her concerns are trivial, like choosing between "silk / or taffeta." The work she does perform ironically keeps her cool—she orders others around and "fans herself."

The juxtaposition of their temperatures is reflective not only of a class disparity, but also of a sexual disconnect. The speaker is unable to voice her true feelings out of a well-founded fear of rejection and retribution, so they manifest physically instead of verbally. The speaker channels her heat into the pearls, counting on them to physically communicate what she cannot say to her mistress. But they are unable to sustain that warmth or penetrate her mistress's cold flesh; they "are cooling" at the end of the poem, after the mistress takes them off. The pearls' fading warmth indicates symbolically that the mistress can never match the speaker's passion or welcome her sexual advances; even if she wanted to, their society would forbid it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "warm"
- **Line 4:** "cool"
- **Line 6:** "She fans herself"
- **Line 7:** "heat"
- **Line 22:** "cooling"
- **Line 24:** "burn"

FULL MOON

Full moons have come to symbolize a number of ideas within literary contexts. While the image has many connotations that are thematically relevant to "Warming Her Pearls," its main function here is to express the overwhelming nature of the speaker's desires.

For thousands of years, the moon has been associated with

femininity. It was also believed that various phases of the moon could bring on temporary bouts of insanity—the word "lunacy" comes from the Latin "luna," meaning moon. And indeed, the speaker's obsession with her mistress consumes her. The radiant white orb even resembles her fixation: the pearls themselves. Its moon hangs over the speaker, seeming to control her mind and body, just as it controls the ocean's tides. Its fullness also reflects the magnitude of her desire, which spills over, "burning" her, as she thinks of the pearls abandoned in their case.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "Full moon"

POETIC DEVICES

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton features heavily in "Warming Her Pearls," where it helps to create a dreamlike mood. The lack of conjunctions—words like "but" and "and"—allows images and ideas to flow into one another without interruption. As a result, the reader organically follows the speaker's trains of thought as she fantasizes about her mistress.

Asyndeton first appears in line 2, where helps maintain the trochaic DA-dum DA-dum rhythm, building momentum at the poem's outset. At the same time, it creates sonic interest through consonant /w/ and /r/ sounds as well as the repetition of "them" (an example of epistrophe):

> bids me wear them, warm them, until evening

The next few examples of asyndeton are introduced by the statements "I think of her" and "I dream about her [...] picture her," indicating that the coming scenes live in the speaker's imagination. Here, asyndeton builds a mood that is consistent with her frame of mind. For example, in stanza 3, the speaker focuses initially on the image of her mistress dancing. Her focus then broadens slightly to capture the men with whom she dances and their confused expressions, then drifts to more abstract sensory details—her own scent, then the scent of her mistress's perfume—before settling on the pearls.

The speaker connects these images with commas rather than conjunctions and other grammatical elements that would add clarity at the expense of lyricism. Consider, for instance, how different these lines would sound if they did use conjunctions:

> in my attic bed and picture her dancing
> with tall men who are puzzled by my faint, persistent scent,
> beneath her French perfume and her milky stones."

Such structuring would create one large scene with depth and realism, instead of the effusive, drifting thoughts that flow throughout the poem. In other words, asyndeton places images side by side rather than in a linear order, so that the reader meanders among coexisting, chronologically ambiguous vignettes. Therefore, reading the poem feels like being immersed in the speaker's thoughts, providing greater access to her frame of mind.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "wear them, warm them"
- **Line 5:** "resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk"
- **Lines 9-10:** "I dream about her / in my attic bed; picture her"
- **Line 11:** "tall men, puzzled"
- **Line 12:** "her French perfume, her milky stones"
- **Lines 13-14:** "I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot, / watch the soft blush"
- **Lines 18-20:** "Undressing, / taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching / for the case, slipping naked into bed"

CAESURA

Almost every line of this poem is enjambed and the speaker uses a variety of punctuation throughout. As a result, caesura takes many forms and has a number of functions throughout the poem. Looking at the poem as a whole, caesura generally works with enjambment to create a sense of contained chaos. Most line breaks occur where standard speech does *not* call for a pause, while the caesurae denote natural pauses. Lines 7-8 are a good example of this effect:

> whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering
> each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

In terms of the poem's flow, the line breaks appear fairly arbitrary and chaotic, sometimes even breaking stanzas mid-sentence. They necessitate many caesurae and leave phrase after phrase hanging at the ends of their lines. However, these odd breaks result in a series of fairly regular lines and stanzas, which appear orderly on the page. In this way, the poem's structure reflects the speaker's external obedience and internal strife. In the face of likely social and economic ruin, she is compelled to contain her feelings for her mistress, which fester inside of her; she appears calm but *feels* chaotic, just like many of the stanzas.

Caesura has very different functions on a line-by-line level. Throughout the poem, caesurae distinguish individual vignettes and string them together, often with the help of asyndeton. This structure results in a narrative that feels organic but is somewhat incoherent, mimicking the speaker's stream of consciousness as she daydreams. The effect begins in the poem's very first lines: the reader is presented with an image of

the speaker's skin, then a set of pearls, followed by her mistress directing her to wear them, which presumably already happened. All of a sudden it's the evening and the speaker is brushing her mistress's hair. Next, the reader is transported to six o'clock, unclear as to whether this is a jump forward or back in time, and so on.

The internal punctuation throughout this first stanza and others creates distinct vignettes and places them side by side, letting the speaker avoid explaining their relationships to one another. Instead, each image seems to give way to the next, the reader instinctively following the zigs and zags of the speaker's wandering mind. In lines 18 and 21 (after "in my head" and "she always does"), this kind of caesura goes even further—the ellipses delineate a dream sequence of sorts by giving the appearance of drifting away from reality and then back toward it.

In a few instances, however, caesura actually has the opposite effect, producing short, pithy sentences that ground the reader and increase the speaker's credibility. In line 9, the abrupt "She's beautiful" breaks up a chain of dreamy images with a direct statement that appears truthful and concrete, even though it is an opinion. A similar effect occurs in line 17, where two simple announcements ("Full moon. Her carriage brings her home.") instantly transport the reader and construct the backdrop for a new scene. The caesurae in these instances contain such straightforward "truths," giving them force and reasserting the speaker's authority.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "skin, her pearls. My"
- **Line 2:** "them, warm them, until"
- **Line 3:** "hair. At six, I"
- **Line 4:** "cool, white throat. All"
- **Line 5:** "Room, contemplating"
- **Line 6:** "tonight? She"
- **Line 7:** "willingly, my"
- **Line 8:** "pearl. Slack," "neck, her"
- **Line 9:** "beautiful. I"
- **Line 10:** "bed; picture"
- **Line 11:** "men, puzzled," "faint, persistent"
- **Line 12:** "perfume, her"
- **Line 15:** "sigh. In"
- **Line 17:** "moon. Her"
- **Line 18:** "head.... Undressing"
- **Line 19:** "jewels, her"
- **Line 20:** "case, slipping," "bed, the"
- **Line 21:** "does.... And"
- **Line 23:** "sleeps. All"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is common throughout this poem. These repeated consonants often produce euphony, or pleasant sounds that are easy to pronounce and sound nice together, giving the poem a harmonious lyricism and contributing to its dreamy mood. Consonant sibilance created by repeating /s/ and /sh/ sounds, as well as similar /th/ and /f/ sounds, creates a gentle hissing effect that can be found in each line of the poem and is responsible for much of its euphony.

Here is a closer look at sibilance in the poem's first lines:

> Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
> bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
> when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them

Other consonant euphonic sounds like /m/, /n/, /h/, /l/, /w/ and /r/ also help to establish a soft, airy temperament at the poem's opening:

> Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
> bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
> when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them

This lyric effect continues throughout the remainder of the poem with various consonants featuring heavily in different sections.

There are a few places, however, where harder repeated consonant sounds like /k/, /p/, and /t/ create a harsh effect. These are called aspirated sounds, which means that they produce a forceful release of air from the mouth when spoken. In contrast to the otherwise idyllic mood, such sounds come across as very severe when they occur in close succession, as in line 8: "Slack on my neck, her rope." The aspirated consonants all appear within stressed, one-syllable words, giving them additional force. The harshness of these sounds reflects the subtle violence of the image they describe. Thus, the speaker employs consonance to build a dreamy, lyrical atmosphere *and* to disrupt that atmosphere in accordance with her attitude towards the poem's events.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Next," "my own skin, her pearls. My mistress"
- **Line 2:** "bids me wear them, warm them, until evening"
- **Line 3:** "when I'll brush her hair. At six,," "place them"
- **Line 4:** "round her cool, white throat," "All day," "think," "her"
- **Line 5:** "resting," "Room," "contemplating silk"
- **Line 6:** "which gown," " fans herself"
- **Line 7:** "whilst," "work willingly," "slow"
- **Line 8:** "pearl," "Slack," "neck," "rope"
- **Line 9:** "beautiful," "dream"
- **Line 10:** "bed," "picture," "dancing"
- **Line 11:** "men," "puzzled," "my," "faint," "persistent scent"
- **Line 12:** "French perfume"

- **Line 13:** “shoulders,” “rabbit's foot”
- **Line 14:** “soft blush seep,” “skin”
- **Line 15:** “like,” “indolent sigh,” “looking,” “glass”
- **Line 16:** “lips part,” “as,” “speak”
- **Line 17:** “Her carriage brings her home”
- **Line 18:** “her,” “every movement,” “my,” “head”
- **Line 19:** “taking,” “off,” “slim”
- **Line 20:** “for,” “case,” “slipping,” “naked,” “way”
- **Line 21:** “always,” “awake”
- **Line 22:** “knowing,” “now”
- **Line 23:** “where my mistress sleeps,” “All,” “night”
- **Line 24:** “feel,” “burn”

ENJAMBMENT

The speaker makes ample use of enjambment throughout "Warming Her Pearls" to reflect the poem's meanings on a visual level. As described in this guide's entry on caesura, the speaker breaks the text into lines of similar length and arranges them into quatrains, or four-line stanzas, so that they *appear* tidy and organized. However, this results in a great deal of internal punctuation, and the line breaks almost always occur in the middles of sentences and clauses, where it would be awkward to pause in natural speech. Thus, while enjambment creates the *illusion* of order, it causes other forms of chaos. In this way, the poem's physical form matches the speaker's life—outwardly disciplined and obedient, but inwardly tumultuous.

The speaker's monologue is an account of her inner narrative as she goes about her day. As such, the poem contains a long string of daydreams that fade into one another. Due to the lack of end punctuation, most lines appear to drift off, hanging out in space and flowing into the next, mimicking the speaker's meandering thoughts. In a few instances, enjambment even causes the poem to physically mirror the images and ideas that conclude its lines. For example, line 7 runs into line 8, linked by the word "entering," mirroring the speaker's heat as it flows into the pearls. Line 11 is the poem's longest, carrying on past the surrounding text and lingering like the speaker's "persistent scent" described in that line. Similarly, line 19 concludes with "her slim hand reaching," as if the line itself is outstretched, trying to grasp something out of reach.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “mistress / bids”
- **Lines 2-3:** “evening / when”
- **Lines 3-4:** “them / round”
- **Lines 5-6:** “silk / or”
- **Lines 6-7:** “herself / whilst”
- **Lines 7-8:** “entering / each”
- **Lines 9-10:** “her / in”
- **Lines 10-11:** “dancing / with”
- **Lines 11-12:** “scent / beneath”
- **Lines 14-15:** “skin / like”
- **Lines 15-16:** “looking-glass / my”
- **Lines 17-18:** “see / her”
- **Lines 19-20:** “reaching / for”
- **Lines 20-21:** “way / she”
- **Lines 22-23:** “now / in”
- **Lines 23-24:** “night / I”

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is the main tool that the speaker uses to differentiate her lifestyle and state of mind from that of her mistress. The speaker and the mistress are very different in a number of key ways, and various kinds of juxtaposition highlight those differences and the way they shape the two women's relationship.

For example, the speaker repeatedly contrasts her own warmth with her mistress’s coldness. The speaker generates bodily heat as she works for her mistress, who “fans herself,” keeping her flesh “cool” and “white.” These images cast the speaker as hardworking and active while her mistress appears idle, emphasizing their different social classes.

Similarly, the speaker thinks about her mistress all day, obsessing over her every movement. Her mistress, on the other hand, thinks only about which dress she should wear. Later, the speaker lies awake at night, burning with passion for her mistress, who sleeps soundly as the pearls cool beside her. These contrasts highlight how the mistress will never reciprocate the speaker's feelings; there's a deep divide between their experiences, even though they live in the same house. Thus, through juxtaposition, the speaker suggests that she has a crowded slate of real concerns, while her mistress lives a carefree, frivolous life.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “my own skin, her pearls”
- **Line 2:** “warm”
- **Line 4:** “cool, white,” “I think of her”
- **Lines 5-6:** “contemplating silk / or taffeta”
- **Lines 6-7:** “She fans herself / whilst I work willingly, my slow heat”
- **Line 10:** “my attic bed; picture her dancing”
- **Lines 11-12:** “my faint, persistent scent / beneath her French perfume”
- **Line 21:** “I lie here awake”
- **Line 22:** “cooling”
- **Line 23:** “my mistress sleeps”
- **Line 24:** “burn”

METAPHOR

The speaker uses two metaphors to describe her mistress's pearls. Because the pearls symbolize the connection between the speaker and her mistress, the comparisons provide a deeper understanding of their dynamic.

In line 8, the speaker refers to the pearls as "her rope," meaning her mistress's rope, which is "slack on [the speaker's own] neck." This metaphor evokes images of bondage and enslavement, suggesting that the speaker's mistress owns and controls her. Figuratively speaking, the speaker's mistress can tighten her grip on the speaker's neck at any moment, bending the speaker to her will. Thus, the pearls can be interpreted as a tool that the speaker's mistress uses to wield authority over her. Indeed, the speaker wears the pearls in service to her mistress, whom she waits on constantly. At the same time, the "rope" also binds the two women together, acting as a bridge between them. The speaker fixates on this function of the pearls, cherishing them as a means through which she can communicate her feelings for her mistress, which she can't speak aloud.

Throughout the poem, the speaker calls attention to the many status symbols—silk gowns, perfume, etc.—that fill her mistress's home. She also refers to the pearls as "jewels" in line 19. However, in line 12 they are described as "milky stones," a much humbler image. The term "milky" has sexual overtones and depicts the pearls as cloudy rather than radiant, while "stones" reduces them to valueless rocks. In this way, the speaker projects her own commonness and sexuality onto the necklace. This metaphor appears when the speaker lies in an isolated attic, picturing her mistress wearing the pearls as she dances with potential suitors at a lavish event. The speaker imagines that her scent, carried by the pearls, lingers on her mistress's skin and confuses the men she dances with. By using metaphor to play up the association between herself and the pearls, the speaker inserts herself into this scene, as if she plans to stop her mistress from getting closer to any of these men—part of a larger trend in which the speaker uses the pearls to attain greater intimacy with her mistress.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Slack on my neck, her rope."
- **Line 12:** "her milky stones"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

While the speaker works, she imagines what her mistress might be thinking about as she rests in her sitting room. She decides that the most pressing issue on her mistress's mind in that moment is likely a wardrobe decision, so she puts forth the question that her mistress presumably asks herself—"which gown tonight?"

This is the poem's only rhetorical question, but the unconventional use of this poetic device gives it comedic force. Typically, rhetorical questions add depth to texts by introducing uncertainty and/or confronting the reader directly. Sometimes they strengthen the speaker's point by suggesting an obvious answer or emphasizing the importance of the matter at hand. Here, however, the rhetorical question has laughably low stakes. The speaker's decision to use the word "contemplating" to describe her mistress snidely suggests that luxury fabrics are a serious concern for her mistress, something that she genuinely *would* consider at length. The rhetorical question creates no suspense, ambiguity, or depth of meaning, as it is irrelevant to the poem's events. In fact, the question undermines its own importance by suggesting that the matter should be carefully thought over, which makes it appear ridiculous.

By insinuating that her mistress has no substantive concerns, the speaker differentiates herself from her mistress. The speaker describes her own interior life at length, deeming it worthy of real consideration. The implications of this rhetorical question also help the speaker create a sexually idealized version of her mistress that essentially functions as a blank screen onto which the speaker projects her fantasies, without interference from her mistress's personal desires or convictions, as she imagines that her mistress simply has none. The question is an apt example of the subtle but important character flaws that dramatic monologues often draw out of their speakers. While the speaker praises her mistress's physical form at length, she also dismisses her intellectually and emotionally, revealing a degree of cruelty and resentment.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "which gown tonight?"

SIMILE

The poem's lone simile occurs in its third stanza, where the speaker describes applying her mistress's makeup. She compares the way the powder sinks into her mistress's skin to "an indolent sigh."

"Indolent" is another word for "lazy," implying a lack of effort. By this point in the poem, the speaker has thoroughly detailed her mistress's preference for leisure over exertion. When she *is* physically active, it is only to order the speaker around, fan herself, dance at a swanky party, and, later, prepare herself for sleep. According to the speaker, even her thoughts are dull—"which gown tonight?" As a result of her inactivity and general lack of stimulation, the speaker's mistress has "cool, white" flesh. This characterization stands in contrast with the speaker's own bodily heat, which results from her hard work and burning desires.

The speaker applies blush to her mistress so that she appears flushed, which is typically a sign of a strong emotional response

or carnal excitement. But the simile allows the speaker to make it clear that this is an illusion—even her mistress's skin appears passive and disinterested as it takes on color, as if it is letting out a bored sigh. This simile is one example of a broader trend in which the speaker insists that her mistress has little in the way of an emotional or intellectual life of her own; that way, the speaker is free to let her own passionate imagination run wild.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** "the soft blush seep through her skin / like an indolent sigh"

VOCABULARY

Mistress (Line 1, Line 23) - A woman, usually wealthy, who presides over a staff of domestic servants. This term can also refer to a woman who is having an illicit sexual relationship. Although the mistress in the poem does not engage in such a relationship, the speaker wishes that they could be together, so these connotations give the term additional charge.

Bids (Line 2) - Directs someone (in this case, the speaker) to do something. This usage is outdated, and modern readers will mostly associate "bid" with fancy items (such as precious jewelry) sold at auction. The speaker's word choice thus implies materiality, helping to establish the theme of class.

Taffeta (Line 6) - A woven fabric that is crisp and lustrous, making it a popular choice for evening wear and high-end apparel.

Rabbit's foot (Line 13) - Literally the dismembered foot of a rabbit, which was a popular tool for makeup application during the Victorian era due to its shape and texture. Rabbits' and hares' feet have also been considered good luck for thousands of years.

Indolent (Line 15) - Lazy; performed without any effort. The speaker suggests that her mistress's life is so free of exertion that even her skin is lazy.

Looking-glass (Line 15) - A mirror. Mirrors were luxury items during the 19th century. Because they reflect light and the world around them, mirrors have long been associated with truth and self-knowledge. Indeed, while the speaker may burn with desire within her interior fantasy world, she must appear to be a silent, obedient young woman.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Warming Her Pearls" is a dramatic monologue written in free-verse, meaning that it does not adhere to any traditional poetic form with an overarching rhyme scheme and consistent meter. However, the lines are broken up in a relatively uniform way—there are four lines of similar length in each of the six stanzas (making them quatrains). At first glance, it is easy to mistake this work for a formal poem like a ballad, but it quickly becomes clear that this is not the case. In fact, the lines are frequently broken up in the middle of clauses and sentences, resulting in a great deal of caesura and enjambment. Plus, internal rhymes occur seemingly at random, and whenever the poem settles into a pattern of stresses or syllables per line, it is quickly derailed. As a result, the line breaks force the poem into quatrains that look regular but read as far more chaotic, reflecting the inner turmoil of the speaker, who is required to suppress her overwhelming desires beneath a calm facade.

On that note, the poem can also be thought of as a dramatic monologue. It delves into the inner mind of its main character, who speaks to an unnamed audience and slowly but surely reveals that she is in love with her mistress. Dramatic monologues were made popular in the Victorian era, making it a particularly suitable poetic form here; it feels as though Duffy is giving a nod to the era in which her poem is set.

METER

"Warming Her Pearls" does not conform to any particular meter. While the rhythm often alternates between stressed and unstressed syllables, even settling into near-perfect trochaic or iambic meter in several places, there are many deviations and the poem lacks a comprehensive pattern of stresses or syllables per line.

When the meter does become regular, it builds rhythmic momentum that helps one line flow into next over awkward line breaks. Furthermore, breaks from such metric patterns draw the reader's attention to important words and phrases.

The first stanza is a great example of these general trends. Its meter begins and ends irregular but otherwise follows trochaic pentameter, meaning that there are five poetic feet per line, each consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable in a DA-dum DA-dum pattern:

> Next to | my own | skin, her | pearls. My | mistress
> bids me | wear them, | warm them, | until | evening
> when I'll | brush her | hair. At | six, I | place them
> round her | cool, white | throat. All | day I | think of
> her,

In the first line, the second trochee is replaced by an iamb, which helps to juxtapose the speaker's "own skin" with her mistress's "pearls" by stressing both noun phrases. The otherwise regular meter of the first three lines helps to build momentum at the poem's outset, allowing readers to get their bearings and providing a false sense of security. But in line 4, "cool" and "white" are one-syllable adjectives of equal importance, so they each receive metrical stress. By placing

them side by side, the speaker interrupts the established rhythm and calls attention to the stark frigidity of her mistress's neck, in contrast to her own warmth. Furthermore, there is an additional stressed syllable—"her"—at the end of line 4, causing it to trail on slightly longer than the preceding lines, mimicking the lengthy periods of time the speaker spends daydreaming about her mistress and highlighting the depth of the speaker's fixation.

Similar patterns of building and disrupting rhythmic momentum occur throughout the remainder of the poem and can be interpreted overall as a reflection of the speaker's attempts to constrain her lust, which nonetheless spills over from time to time.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no discernable pattern of rhymes that unifies the poem. Instead, internal rhymes come and go haphazardly. Some are perfect rhymes and others are slant rhymes, created by the repetition of similar vowel and consonant sounds, also known as assonance and consonance.

These scattered rhymes have various effects, sometimes drawing the reader's attention to important images and ideas by creating sonic interest, like "her pearls" from line 1 and "heat entering / each" from lines 7-8. Other times they link related concepts, such as in lines 10-11: "my faint persistent scent / beneath her French perfume."

In certain contexts, internal rhyme reinforces metrical regularity by adding additional emphasis to stressed syllables, as the near rhymes created by assonance do in line 18: "her every movement in my head.... Undressing." They can also have the opposite effect, with the added emphasis helping to disrupt established meter, such as subtly rhyming "dust" with "blush" and "watch" with "soft" in lines 13-14:

> I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
> watch the soft blush seep through her skin

In all of the above examples, rhymes appear erratically and unsystematically, heightening the sense of restrained chaos that characterizes the poem's speaker and its rhythms.

SPEAKER

While some men were employed as domestic servants during the Victorian era, they would not have completed grooming tasks for their mistresses, indicating that the speaker of "Warming Her Pearls" is female. Female servants, who usually married and retired before age 30, were recruited as young girls, sometimes as young as eight years old. However, the speaker's ardent sexual desires indicate that she is at least a teenager. Furthermore, she appears to be what was known as the "Lady's Maid" of the house, who maintains her mistress's appearance, including helping her dress, applying makeup, and styling her hair, all of which are referenced in the poem. Because this was a prestigious role for a servant, she was expected to be educated and skilled in domestic work.

The reader is not privy to much information about the speaker's background, only that she is young, female, working-class, and queer, meaning that she does not identify with strict social expectations surrounding gender and sexuality—all factors that contribute to her subjugation. Throughout the poem, the speaker struggles to reconcile her suffering and the need to maintain appearances with the sexual excitement that serving her mistress brings.

Like the speaker, Carol Ann Duffy is female and queer, and although she was born over half a century after the end of the Victorian era, persecution based on factors such as class and sexuality persists today. Indeed, these themes appear frequently throughout Duffy's work.

SETTING

The poem's events take place in a large estate occupied by an upper-class family and its staff. The scope of the speaker's tasks and the living conditions she describes are characteristic of the United Kingdom's Victorian era, a period of great economic inequality and social austerity lasting from 1837 to 1901, during which time Queen Victoria ruled.

While the speaker describes many of the luxurious items that fill the estate—jewels, expensive gowns, French perfume, the looking-glass—she reveals very little about the estate itself. By focusing on the objects that fill the home, the speaker is able to convey its opulence through various status symbols, drawing attention to the starkly different lifestyles she and her mistress lead while living under the same roof. The speaker's infrequent references to specific areas of the estate reinforce this socioeconomic disparity; it's as if she doesn't really see much of what is technically her own home. She mentions "the Yellow Room," presumably a sitting room (also known as a drawing room or music room), a private chamber in the interior of the house meant for the family's entertainment and leisure. The speaker also mentions the attic she rests in while her mistress sleeps in undoubtedly quite different quarters.

In many ways, the poem's events take place inside the speaker's own head as she imagines what her mistress is doing. She introduces images of her mistress with phrases like "I think of her," "I dream about her," and "I see / her every movement in my head." Thus, the speaker's monologue gives the reader access to her inner thoughts, which she otherwise must keep to herself.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Warming Her Pearls" is dedicated to Judith Radstone, an activist and bookseller who was a fixture in many literary circles during the 20th century. Radstone told Carol Ann Duffy about the practice of ladies' maids in the Victorian era warming their mistresses' pearls to bring out their luster.

The poem was first published in Duffy's 1987 collection *Selling Manhattan*. In this volume, as in others, Duffy showcases her mastery of the dramatic monologue. She is known for her ability to inhabit the voices of others, especially those who have historically been marginalized, with empathy and poetic dexterity. While Duffy has been writing feminist poetry and love poems from the outset of her career, "Warming Her Pearls" is one of her earliest poems about queer love specifically.

Duffy's literary influences are diverse. As a young person, she preferred reading the work of contemporary and international poets like Pablo Neruda who were not covered in school. But her command of the dramatic monologue can be traced back to Elizabeth Barrett Browning ("How do I love thee?"), and her use of common, accessible language to William Wordsworth ("I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"). She attended university in Liverpool during the 1970s, when the city was a hub of artistic innovation. She lived with poet Adrian Henri, and the influence of Henri and other Liverpool poets is reflected in her penchant for simple language and emotional expression, often with a humorous bent.

In addition to many collections of poetry, Duffy's oeuvre includes several plays and over two dozen books for children. While she was passed over for the position of UK Poet Laureate in 1999, reportedly over concerns about her sexuality, the controversy brought her increased popularity and in 2009 she became the first woman and the first LGBTQ poet to be appointed to the position.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The nature of the speaker's work and the living conditions she describes indicate that the poem takes place in Britain's Victorian era, the period from 1837 to 1901 when Queen Victoria ruled. These years were characterized by tremendous economic inequality, stark class differences, and strict social expectations. Women had limited rights and freedoms and their influence was confined to the domestic sphere. Furthermore, women were expected to be chaste, and same-gender relationships were taboo; sodomy had been illegal since 1533.

An alternative to sex work, domestic servitude was the most popular profession among women and girls experiencing poverty. Maids were recruited at a young age, usually around 10 years old, but oftentimes younger or older, and they usually retired before age 30 upon finding a husband. Even working for wealthy families, they received very little pay and lived in modest, threadbare servants' quarters (and many middle-class families did not offer their domestic staff room and board). Male servants were less common and received higher pay. Within a large domestic staff, maids were given specific titles and responsibilities. In "Warming Her Pearls," the speaker is a lady's maid, tasked with grooming her mistress and taking care of her daily needs.

The title of the poem and the events it describes reference a little-known fact about pearls—their many layers of nacre, or mother-of-pearl, absorb and store bodily heat as they are worn, and that warmth is later emitted. The skin's surface oils and moisture help keep the pearls soft and lustrous. Therefore, during and around the Victorian era, wealthy women would direct their ladies' maids to wear their mistresses' pearls under their clothing. As the servants worked throughout the day, the warmth of their bodies would bring out the pearls' natural luster and keep them in good condition. This ensured that the pearls would keep their mistresses warm and look most alluring around their necks in the evenings.

Discrimination on the basis of gender, class, and sexuality is certainly not confined to the Victorian era. For instance, sexual relationships between men were decriminalized in Scotland, where Carol Ann Duffy was born and raised, in 1981, just six years before this poem was published. The women's liberation and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s created new space for queer women in the arts.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Carol Ann Duffy — A concise summary of Duffy's life and works from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- The Liverpool Poets — An overview of Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, and Brian Patten's artistic practices in mid-20th century Liverpool. (http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/liverpool-poets.html)
- Feeling Chilly? Reach for Your Pearls — An explanation of why pearls store heat. (https://www.spey.com/2018/01/09/why-pearls-warm-against-skin/)
- Hard Conditions for Victorian Servants — A synopsis of the conditions in which domestic servants lived and worked during the Victorian era, with a hierarchy of positions and pay. (https://www.knebworthhouse.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/victorian-servants.pdf)
- "Warming Her Pearls" on the South Bank Show — A

performance of Duffy's poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgA3dcysiEA)

- A Short History of LGBTQ Rights in the UK — An examination of LGBT rights in Britain from 1533, with primary source material. (https://www.bl.uk/lgbtq-histories/articles/a-short-history-of-lgbt-rights-in-the-uk)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Valentine
- War Photographer

HOW TO CITE

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