**Warming her Pearls**

Warming her Pearls is an interior monologue where a maid expresses her intimate feelings towards her mistress. The poem explores the strange co-dependence between a mistress and her maid. Carol Ann Duffy hints that in the course of the daily rituals of care, there is every possibility of the women falling illegitimately in love. The tension between a care that is bought through employment and the resulting care as well as erotic tenderness that is subsequently felt in spite of the social and economic separation is explored by the poet here in this poem. The maid transforms the everyday gestures of grooming her mistress into erotic moments of thwarted possibility and connection.

The mistress of the house ordered her maid to wear her pearls before a function. The maid is besotted by the mistress and she acknowledges it by saying that she thinks about the mistress ‘resting in the Yellow Room’. She is acutely aware of the enticing physicality of the mistress. The maid seems to be in love for her apparently unobtainable mistress. The mistress is said to be engaged in trivial matters, ‘contemplating silk or taffeta’. However, it is unclear as to what the mistress feels as the speaker has no access to such knowledge. All that the maid does is dream about her mistress while lying on her bed up in the attic. The speaker refers to her mistress dancing with ‘tall men’, which highlights the desirability of the mistress. There is a hint of the secret illicit lesbian desire with the mention of the ‘faint, persistent scent’ of the maid’s smell on the mistress’s pearls. The maid goes on to describe the ‘blush’ that seeps through the mistress as she scratches her with ‘a rabbit’s foot’. It appears as if the maid wants to speak out her feelings for the mistress as her ‘red lips part’. However, whether the mistress is aware of her maid’s desire is unclear. Thus the maid is voiceless and her desire to ‘speak’ of private matters remains unfulfilled. Then, mentally the maid undresses the mistress who is in another room. She visualizes ‘cooling’ on her neck. The absence of the rope of pearls casts the maid adrift in her longing. Duffy’s poem is autoerotic and the monologues final word ‘burn’ accentuates the frustration of such a longing.

The very opening assertion, ‘Next to my own skin, her pearls’, boldly foregrounds the maid’s physical proximity to her mistress. The hierarchical bond between the mistress and her maid assumes an implied eroticism with ‘bids me wear them, warm them…’ The maid has re-appropriated the mistress’s order into her own secret sexual fantasy. The maid’s acute awareness of her mistresses’ enticing physicality is obvious in ‘her cool, white throat…’ This is quickly followed by the besotted acceptance, ‘All day I think of her, resting in the Yellow Room’. The maid is lost in love for her apparently unobtainable mistress who is languidly ‘resting’ in her ‘Yellow Room’.

In the poem Duffy uses the juxtaposition of the maid’s labours and the mistress’s luxurious lifestyle to demonstrate the socio-economic background as the reason that person’s feelings are unrequited. The maid’s personal labour is referred to often ‘Next to my own skin, her pearls’ was the mistress’s house jewelry to show her status wherein the maid has only her body and her work to rely on. There the more Duffy juxtaposes action with passivity ‘She fans herself whilst I work willingly’ – this is ironic and her imagined relationship with the mistress is completely passive and unable to work. It is clear that there is very little space for the maid in social sphere as she admits, ‘I dream about her in my attic bed’. The attic bed creates sympathy by reminding us of the maid’s poverty, her isolation from her mistress and also the implication that the roof over her head belongs ultimately to her mistress’s husband.

The motif of hot and cold further shows an unrequited love relationship and the distance between the two: while the maid burns, the mistress remains cold and impassive. The mistress’s exploitation of the maid’s body of her heat is used to give luster and shine to pearls she can never dream of possessing. ‘My mistress bids me wear them’ reminds us of the marginalization and oppression of women on two levels: first the use of the maids’ body to warm the pearls and second the very reason the pearls have been warmed is to satisfy a judgment or male gaze which would see it’s women dressed to seduce and impress something the mistress herself as a victim of. Despite her obvious lack of passion the mistress’s cool white throat becomes an object of desire whereas the maid’s heat and passion becomes a commodity.

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