

'Who's zoomin' who?' Hierarchies of Intimacy in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* and Carol Ann Duffy's 'Warming her pearls'.

The dramatic monologue often explores the unsettling ambivalence of desire. A voice speaks to us of intimacies and longings that may threaten to dismantle the very structure of the private life, even of identity itself. The reader becomes aware of the speaker's compelling need to reveal through testimony, untold secrets, and maskings. This imperative for disclosure in the Dramatic Monologue, engenders a palpable tension which haunts this poetic form. Who can read Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover' without a shudder at the fastidious rationalisation of murder? It is as if the voice of the speaker is emerging from a long oppressive silence, finally yielding to the perverse liberation of expression and voicedness. Browning's monologues memorably offer the reader the unsettling and ironic gift of love's nemesis, pathological jealousy.

Carol Ann Duffy's 'Warming her pearls' explores the very intimate and even strangely co-dependent relationship between a maid and her mistress. For although maids may dress and touch their mistresses through the daily rituals of care, because it is their prescribed role, Duffy suggests they may also fall somewhat illegitimately in love. And this love is rendered illegitimate for economic reasons as well as for those of social status, and sexual proclivity. 'Warming her pearls' explores the tension between a care that is bought through employment and the resulting care and erotic tenderness that is subsequently experienced in spite of social and economic separation. Just as Lady Dedlock's French maid Hortense, in Dickens's *Bleak House*, experiences a complex and ambivalent attachment to her employer in the novel, so Duffy's maid transforms the everyday gestures of grooming her mistress into erotic moments of thwarted possibility and connection.

This secret romantic attachment of the maid for her mistress rewrites the dynamics between servant and employer, so that all the conventional signs of such an economically stable relationship become eroticised and suffused with fantasy and the instability created through sexual longing. The connotations of being or having a 'mistress' are correspondingly re-appropriated in Duffy's poem, adding to the illicit suggestiveness of the poem's subtext. For whilst we are accustomed to hearing about men having mistresses, we may be unaccustomed to women taking mistresses! Women are not supposed to 'take' a mistress for themselves, let alone if they are employed as maids to serve their employers with their many needs. Duffy provocatively explores an erotic 'other' possibility in the poem, a possibility later of course explored in Sarah Waters' best selling novel *Fingersmith*.

In Duffy's poem, each stanza explores the familiar, all too known 'spaces' of the home occupied by maid and mistress, recognising that desire renders all such places unashamedly erotic. Each stanza acts as another room or 'place' in the day's rituals; we may all crave to know the whereabouts and activities of the beloved, but this poem ironises the erotic power and potential of such knowledge. For the maid *does know* everything about her mistresses day, it is her job to do so after all. Yet such knowledge of course propels and feeds her fantasies about her mistress, whilst

ironically revealing their restriction, as all her mistress's actions reinforce her distance from her maid.

As I have mentioned earlier, this interest in the erotically charged, 'what if' relationship between mistress and servant is subversively explored by Sarah Waters in her novel *Fingersmith*. Waters superbly renegotiates the erotic potential of such a relationship, making this sexually explosive dynamic central to all the machinations of the plot and denouement. The consummation of the sexual attraction between the ostensible mistress Maud, and her maid Sue Trinder is profoundly tender, embracing the unnerving permeability that may exist between the acts of 'giving' pleasure and 'taking' pleasure in sex. Waters' use of the dual narrator in the text, allows the reader to visit the consummation scene twice, which reveals both the reciprocity and intensity of the attraction. And it is this reciprocity between the protagonists in *Fingersmith*, that is significantly missing in Duffy's poem. The poem is always and 'only' a monologue and it is the solitary and lonely condition of the speaker that engenders the poem's pathos and power. The poem remains autoerotic and the monologue's final word 'burn' accentuates the frustration of such longing.

However, there are some very powerful and revealing connections between the novel and poem and it is these connections that I shall now briefly explore.

Sarah Water's *Fingersmith* reveals the unbounded propinquity of sexual need. The supposed mistress of Briar, Maud, recalls her sexual initiation with her maid Sue Trinder with an intensity and mind loosening eroticism which matches that of Sue's earlier narrative:

'- I am breaking, shattering, bursting out of her hand. She begins to weep. Her tears come upon my face. She puts her mouth to them *You pearl*, she says, as she does it. Her voice is broken. *You pearl*.'

The pleasure of consummation is a rebirth. The old self becomes fragmented in order to be reborn. We hear and feel a very personal spring/growth through orgasmic release. It is almost confusing as to what and who ends where. Differentiation is fluid and ambiguous. Orgasm moves the boundaries between self and other. This blurring of separation between self and other reveals the joy (and emotional release) of sexual connection and recognition. The repetition of 'pearl' reveals the revelation of intimacy both internally found and externally acknowledged.

It also reveals the danger of intimacy through its risk of loss and security. For a pearl is both precious and the outcome of 'irritation' to the housing 'oyster' self. Their relationship will have its grittier aspect. For the novel with its underbelly of betrayal and painful revelation, embraces the ambivalence of the pearl, with its cool aesthetic beauty and its hard unseen core; a source of irritation, sexual release and growth.

The pearl as the female clitoris is the origin and source of pleasure, the place after all of sexual revelation and release. Thus the 'broken' voiced lover in *Fingersmith* reveals far more about the miraculous revelation that is orgasm, through the reference to 'pearl' than she could have realised at the time. Her voice is broken as her connection to her maid is life changing and is a crisis moment of sexual maturity and revelation. She is literally 'coming of age'.

The solitary maid's voice by contrast in Duffy's famous poem, 'Warming her pearls' remains unbroken and unfulfilled. She finds little release; only articulation. The dramatic monologue here privileges the maid's voice so that we hear a voice ordinarily ignored due to class restrictions, yet this voice gains only frustration through expression, rather than finding catharsis.

The poem bravely foregrounds the maid's physical proximity to her mistress, from its opening assertion: 'next to my own skin, her pearls.' How far can syntax avow and almost integrate the parallel yet widely distant worlds of maid and mistress? There is something lingeringly delicious and yet prohibited about the use of the possessive pronouns and the real intimacy of 'skin' and 'pearls' have a tender connotation that goes significantly beyond the words themselves.

The hierarchical relationship between mistress and maid assumes an implied eroticism with the breathy breathlessness of 'bids me wear them, warm them....' The maid has re-appropriated her mistress's orders into her own secret sexually charged fantasy. The pearls become a code, a talisman, for female sexuality and pleasure.

The acute awareness of the enticing physicality of the other, 'her cool, white throat...' is immediately followed by the besotted acknowledgement, 'all day I think of her, resting in the yellow room.' The enjambment mirroring the running on fantasies of the maid lost in love for her apparently unobtainable mistress. The all-inclusive, agitation of the emphatic 'all day' contrasts with the seemingly languid mistress 'resting' in her designated 'yellow room'.

How far do we all recognise the shame of need here and the almost vampiric desire to know or feel we know the whereabouts of the beloved other? The verb 'think' masks sexual want.

The apparent triviality of the mistress's life choices: 'silk or taffeta' are transformed into suggestively intimate possibilities through the positioning of the present participle 'contemplating' and the very obviously tactile nature of such choices.

But then I wonder who is really fantasising about whom? For the mistress 'fans' herself 'and 'my slow heat entering each pearl' has such tantalisingly overheated erotic potentiality that I don't wonder that the mistress needs some sort of ventilation. But then again the fan itself has its own semiotics of courtship and interest. The very nature of the Dramatic Monologue's viewpoint restricts the reader's ability to know the truth of this relationship and in this example the mistress remains an object of desire rather than being a desiring subject in her own right. We cannot know what the mistress feels as the maid, our narrator, has no access to such knowledge. The lingering eroticism of 'my slow heat entering each pearl' is suggestive of the maid's desire to take her mistress in ways that the mistress's 'pearl' will know.

'Slack on my neck, her rope.' Here we recognise the enslavement of desire and love. Yet both mistress and maid are tied together through the 'rope' of pearls. The position of 'her rope' at the end of a stanza has a strongly declarative aspect. The mistress

owns the pearls and therefore may 'own' the maid. This is further ironised of course if the love is unrequited when their economic inequality is recognised. However there seems to be a tension between the 'slack' nature of the 'rope' of pearls. For if 'slack' it might imply that the maid is not tied tightly to her mistress; yet the mention of 'rope' immediately conjures a feeling of bondage and attachment. Surely this suggests the ambivalence of desire? Who is actually pulling on the rope and is part of the pleasure the promise of sudden tension after the 'slack' stage of anticipation? For if we reconsider the implications of 'Slack on my neck, her rope.' Then it is possible to argue that there is a shared erotic intimacy between maid and mistress. For the 'cool' mistress is metaphorically hanging about the neck of her maid allowing a moment of 'loose' freedom, as against the possessiveness implied by the 'rope'. Here at least there may be a flicker of the duality of desire albeit from the perspective of the maid. The end stopped line thus arousing because of its connotations of pleasurable entanglement; desire demanding the raw connectivity of the body with the other. Hardly surprisingly such subtle realisation is followed by the explicit declaration of 'She's beautiful. I dream about her/in my attic bed. 'Our dream lives are often our secret places of sexual consolation and revelation. In the poem, this is where the maid may find lingering pleasure with her thoughts of her mistress with her pearls. Indeed her mistress is her pearl! And in warming her mistress's pearls then perhaps she is literally and metaphorically warming her own?

I am not sure if the exchange of the pearls between mistress and maid is actually fully resolved by either reading. Perhaps neither knows, the use of symbol suggests far more than can be rationally explained. It could even be argued that part of the dynamics of the relationship between maid and mistress could be this unknowing- a subtly masked dance between the one who serves and the one who serves?

We hear the revelation of acknowledged love and how finally painful such a love may prove to be at the beginning of stanza three: 'She's beautiful.' Does anything else need to be said? I doubt it. The pride of proclamation, the tenderness of acceptance is very strongly heard. .

The 'attic bed' rearranges the erotics of space in the house. The 'attic' situation of the maid, though clearly a hierarchically lower space than that of her mistress, ironically privileges the maid's transgressive desires. For an attic is illicit and 'free' and the maid can fantasise away; the reference to her mistress dancing with 'tall men' highlights the desirability of the mistress. We do not want our objects of lust to be unattractive to others! The phallic aspect of the tall men' contrasts sharply with this secret, illicit lesbian desire and the 'faint, persistent scent' of the maid's smell on the pearls leaves as much or as little to one's imagination as one may dare to contemplate! The idea that the maid has 'marked' her mistress as an animal would mark its territory is subversive to say the least! The visual is overwhelmed by the olfactory!

The good luck connotations of the 'rabbit's foot' are again ironised by the distinctly erotic aspect to the rituals of the maid's and mistress's relationship. The maid is surely gently marking and even scratching the mistress with this foot so that the blush becomes as much a natural manifestation of arousal or projected arousal as being the outcome of artifice in the form of make up. Once again, I remain unsure as to

whether the mistress is latently or surreptitiously colluding with the maid in this archly erotic relationship or whether everything remains a fantasy/projection of the maid. It is certainly true to say that the maid is a voracious reader of her beloved's body and behaviour and like anyone in love, is lost in the codes and semiotics of desire.

The apparent disassociation of the maid from her 'red lips' in the mirror suggests her voicelessness (ironised by her role as speaker in the poem) yet also her proximity to fetishistic pleasure. Is the mistress looking at her maid getting excited by their proximity or is she utterly impervious to this figure? The fact that the lips 'part' reveals the visibility of the maid's desire. How many adverts reveal women's 'availability' through parted lips? And of course the focus on the public lips of the maid implies a very marked desire to 'speak' of more private matters. Displacement rather like the pearl tears in *Fingersmith* seems likely!

The fairy tale aspect of the 'full moon' also introduces again a slightly vampiric possibility and I recall the 'cool, white throat' of the mistress. Do we want to 'devour' the objects of our love? The proximity and enticing susceptibility of flesh? Love renders us 'mad' with longing? Mentally, the maid undresses the mistress who is in another place in their shared yet not shared 'home'. The ellipsis telescopically brings the body of the mistress to the maid's attic bed where she would like to take her.

The lingering fetishism and fascination of the 'slim hand reaching for the case is suffused with euphemism and need. Has the 'case' usurped the pearls? And why the emphasis upon the 'slim' hand? Is this a sexually knowing and 'competent' hand one wonders with the curious maid? Ellipsis suggest the lonely projected release of the speaker, and the maid's wakeful and warm unrest contrast sharply with the cool sleep of the mistress. Yet all this is a projection of the part of the speaker. Perhaps the mistress is as lonely and as erotically consumed as her maid?

Perhaps the sleep of the mistress with the 'cooling' pearls also shows how unfulfilled she might be too? The mistress sleeps alone. Are they separated only by convention, protocol and ignorance? 'All night I feel their absence and I burn.' The absence of the rope of pearls casts the maid adrift in her longing and is in contrast to the resolution in *Fingersmith* where the two women meet once again and transcend the cooling, irritating limitation of the 'pearls':

'My thumb moved slower. It moved to her cheek. Then I found I had cupped her face in my hand. She closed her eyes. Her cheek was smooth – not like a pearl, warmer than pearls.'

Intimacy casts aside the restrictions of naming and self-consciousness. Waters' protagonists discover a love 'warmer than pearls' - a playful, intertextual revelation that celebrates a now original promise of enduring, reciprocal love. Duffy's maid has finally married her mistress!