

The intertextuality of carol ann duffy's "salome"



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"Salome" is a poem taken from Carol Ann Duffy's collection of poems *The World's Wife*; most of the poems share a common feature: a historically marginalized narrator retelling the story from personal perspective. Salome's character originally appeared in the New Testament and over the centuries many novels and paintings focused on Salome and the legend of Salome contributing to iconization of the character as a vicious femme fatale. One of the texts that followed the biblical story of Salome is a fin-de-siecle play written by Oscar Wilde. This play may have even had a larger influence in the creation of Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Salome", than the original story. Such an influence is suggested by the intertextual relationship between the two texts established through characterization and juxtaposition of tone and rhyme.

In Wilde's play, symbolism contributes most to Salome's characterization. Throughout the play the moon can be perceived as a metaphor alluding to the main character. In the opening scene it is depicted by the Page of Herodias "like a woman rising from a tomb," "like a dead woman... looking for dead things". Later on in the play Salome herself reflects on the state of the moon as if reflecting on herself "cold and chaste," "she has never defiled herself ... never abandoned herself to men." These allusions to the moon add to the premonition of despair and to Salome's portrait. The moon's metaphoric presence indirectly depicts Salome as a frigid, haughty and adamant. Although at the end of the play Salome demonstrates emotional intentions to her actions, it is a sick perception of love where the main motives are selfish and obsessive.

Salome as a narrator in Carol Ann Duffy's poem bears strong resemblance with the depiction of the character in the play. In the form of an internal dramatic monologue the poem provides exhibits the thoughts of the heroine creating a dimensional and complex portrayal. The poem indicates such attributes of the character as narcissism, indifference and perversion. The reader gets a strong self-reflection from the character in the lines "the beater or biter, who'd come like a lamb to the slaughter to Salome's bed", which somewhat resembles Salome's self-identification in the play: denoting that even the bad characters seem holy in comparison with her.

There are important quotations in the poem that indicate Salome's coldness of heart and indifference to others, when she wakes with a head next to her, but she doesn't know who it is; seen in the lines "-whose?- what did it matter?" and "What was his name?" Moreover taking into account the lack of empathy that Salome demonstrates in the lines "from pain, I'd guess, maybe from laughter". This line may be interpreted as an indication of Salome's disability to discern between the human emotions. Despite the portrayal of a disturbed and emotionally drained character, the line "ain't life a bitch" could suggest that Salome herself is familiar with the struggles of life, which could potentially justify her vengeful and cruel behavior. Alternatively "ain't life a bitch" may be a sarcastic exclamation, seen as is Salome is in a position of power over the victim and is enjoying life. Either way Carol Ann Duffy succeeds in creating a complex, dimensional character in her poem as well as Oscar Wild in the play.

The structure of the play emphasizes Salome's irrational behavior by providing paradoxical relationship between the content and the tone. The

light, musical tone of the play contradicts the actions of the character accentuating Salome's inconsistent emotions. This makes a morally challenging story. Duffy borrows this element of the play successfully using the structure of free verse and the rhyme to provide gentle build up through the poem although the content insinuates murderous notions of events. The rhyme in the poem is most dynamic in the second stanza, perhaps phonetically implying the sound of dripping blood; the phonetic effect in combination with the descriptions from the first stanza " head on a pillow" with " dark hair, rather matted" may conjure up an image of a severed head.

Through the rhyme in such words as " butter" and " clatter" and " clutter" the poet creates a light musical overtone appealing to the reader's auditory sense. The structure is truly ironic as it combines the structure of a sonnet on the surface and the descriptions of the disturbing actions of a femme fatale. The works of Carol Ann Duffy and Oscar Wilde put Salome in the epicenter of the events taking place, whereas original story in the New Testament gives little to no credit to Salome in John's beheading. The New Testament focuses mostly on John the Baptizer, Herod and Herodias. When given an opportunity to request anything of Herod's, Salome runs to her mother and enquires, " What should I ask for?" declining to make her own choice and establishing her mothers power and absolute rule. In the New Testament Salome is seen as only a " girl" originally without even a name, she seems much younger in the original work than in the subsequent recreations. She acts entirely on the behalf of her mother without regard for personal wishes. The lack of personal motive behind makes Salome bleak and insignificant in the original story.

Carol Ann Duffy borrowed the character from the original bible story in a very idiosyncratic way. Duffy took the character with the least power and lack of opinion and gave her a voice. In the poem "Salome" is seen as an independent character, which can be seen through the chosen form of an internal dramatic monologue. An abundance of first face singular pronouns followed by action verbs (for example "I'll do it again", "I needed" and "I flung") highlight the character's dominant presence. Thus, Carol Ann Duffy recreates the original story of John the Baptizer, crafting it into the story of Salome. Duffy gives strength and independence to Salome, inspired by Oscar Wilde's vision. The effect of intertextuality allows a complex depiction of Salome, which furthermore challenges the reader to interpret and/or understand her motifs and internal feelings.