Pilate's Wife

SUMMARY

The speaker describes her husband by painting a picture of his feminine hands. They were softer than hers, and his nails reminded her of seashells from Galilee. She saw his hands as lazy and effeminate; he used to clap to summon servants to feed him grapes. She flinched under his light, papery touch. This, she says, was what her husband Pontius Pilate was like.

The speaker longed to go back home to Rome—or to be with some other man. By the time Jesus came to Jerusalem, she was bored enough that she disguised herself and snuck out with her maid to join a frantic crowd of Jesus's followers. She stumbled, grabbed a donkey's bridle to right herself, and looked up—

—straight into the face of Jesus. He was ugly. And yet, she remembers, she could tell he was talented. The way he looked at her made her feel he really saw her. His eyes were beautiful. Before she knew it, Jesus had disappeared, his disciples pushing through the crowd and towards the gates of the city.

The night before Jesus's trial, the speaker had a dream about him. He was touching her, but then his touch began to hurt. There was blood everywhere. She looked down and noticed that there was a nail hammered through each of Jesus's palms. When she woke up, she was both aroused and afraid.

She sent her husband a note, warning him to leave Jesus alone. Then she got dressed as quickly as she could. But by the time she got to the trial, the crowd had already made up its mind. Jesus, wearing a crown of thorns, would be executed. They had decided to pardon Barabbas, a thief, instead. The speaker knew Pilate saw her, but he only looked away and rolled up his sleeves.

He washed his useless, perfume-scented hands. Then, Jesus was dragged away to be crucified on the hill known as the Place of Skulls. The speaker's maid knows the rest of the awful story. The speaker asks: Was Jesus God? She answers: Of course he wasn't. But Pilate, she says, believed that he was.

THEMES

MARRIAGE AND WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

"Pilate's Wife" retells the story of Jesus's crucifixion from the perspective of the wife of Pontius Pilate (the Roman governor responsible for Jesus's execution). From the poem's opening lines, the speaker resents her weak, idle, out-of-touch husband, whom she clearly didn't choose for herself. Bored by her husband and her life, she sneaks out to watch Jesus meeting a crowd, looks into his eyes, and is instantly attracted to him. But she's unable either to pursue her own desires or to stop Pontius from killing Jesus, no matter what she does: as a woman and a wife, she has no real power. Women's desires and their strength have long been restricted and ignored, this poem suggests, and marriage has been used as a tool for such oppression.

From the beginning of the poem, the speaker makes it clear that she is in a loveless marriage. She is not attracted to her husband in the least, it seems; Pontius is lazy and effeminate, she complains, and his touch makes her "flinch." She longs to go "home" and be with "someone else," yet is powerless to do so.

Though trapped in her marriage to Pontius, she still has a strong will and desires of her own. In sneaking out to see Jesus speak to a crowd, the speaker is rebelling against her husband. As soon as the speaker locks eyes with Jesus, she is instantly attracted to him, later going on to have a dream about him which leaves her "sweating" and "sexual."

Unfortunately, because of her position as a woman and as Pontius's wife, the speaker has very little real power to act on that will or those desires. She attempts to save Jesus, warning her husband to "leave him alone," but Pontius does not take her seriously. Ultimately, he chooses to ignore her, and Jesus is executed. In this way, the speaker's unwanted marriage undermines her power and represses her desires, suggesting that marriage can be a tool of sexist oppression.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

MASCULINITY, POWER, AND DESIRE

"Pilate's Wife" imagines Jesus's crucifixion from the point of view of the frustrated wife of Pontius Pilate (the Roman governor who had Jesus executed). The speaker finds her husband effeminate, weak, and sexually repulsive. Pontius Pilate might be a high-ranking governor who holds Jesus's life in his hands, but he's also a spineless coward. Jesus, meanwhile, is much more sexually alluring to the speaker because he's "tough," "talented," and devoted to his cause. Being an attractive man, in this speaker's eyes, isn't about political power; it's about having conviction and integrity.

The speaker spends the poem's opening lines complaining about her husband's "woman's" hands and his "idleness." Pontius is "indolent," his "pearly nails" and soft skin conveying that he's unused to hard work. He doesn't even get his own snacks, instead using his soft hands only to "clap" for his servants to bring him more "grapes"!

The speaker finds her husband repulsive not just because he's not traditionally macho, however, but also because he acts without any moral integrity: he lets Jesus die despite "believ[ing]" him to be God. Instead of actually standing for something, he just washes his "useless, perfumed hands" of the whole ordeal. He refuses to take any responsibility for what happens.

Jesus, by contrast, embodies an intensity and conviction that Pilate clearly lacks. He's "talented" where Pilate is lazy, and he has "tough," "brown" hands presumably strengthened and weathered by his devotion to his work. Even more importantly, Jesus actually *sees* the speaker: "He looked at me. I mean he looked at me," the speaker says, suggesting that her own husband rarely does just that. Indeed, Pontius ignores her "warning note" to leave Jesus alone, implicitly because doing so would be politically inconvenient. Though he's "ugly," the speaker is attracted to Jesus because he has what her husband does not: a backbone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 14-16
- Lines 19-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Firstly, his hands—a ...
... me flinch. Pontius.

"Pilate's Wife," like most of the poems in Carol Ann Duffy's collection *The World's Wife*, retells the story of an important man from history or literature from the perspective of one of his female relatives. In this poem, the speaker is the wife of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem who allowed Jesus to be crucified. Famously, Pilate symbolically washed his hands to show that he was done with the whole Jesus business, renouncing any responsibility for Jesus's fate in spite of the fact that he could have stopped the crucifixion with a snap of his fingers. In other words, Pilate was a legendary coward.

As the first stanza shows, Pilate's wife knows that her husband is weak even *before* the crucifixion—and that his hands have something to do with his weakness. The poem begins with her detailed portrait of Pilate's "woman's" hands: "pale, mothy," and soft, manicured and ineffectual. His nails remind her of seashells from Galilee, an allusion to a sea where Jesus gave sermons that sets the poem in the biblical Middle East.

Through the description of Pilate's hands, the speaker reveals other character traits she loathes about her husband. He, like his hands, is lazy, effeminate, and theatrical. The speaker shows her husband clapping to summon servants to feed him grapes, suggesting that he is unable to do anything for himself. His soft hands are the result of his laziness and self-indulgence.

The speaker explains that she not only resents her husband for his idleness, she also finds him sexually unappealing. His touch makes her "flinch." This suggests that she was forced to marry Pilate against her will. Right from the start, then, readers understand that this speaker is living in a bad time and place to be a woman: an era in which women might have very little say over whom they married.

Besides foreshadowing Pilate's fateful hand-washing, the speaker's focus on hands shows that Pilate is wealthy, pampered, and powerful, with a safe and comfortable position in society.

Pilate's wife will tell her story in free verse: poetry without a regular rhyme scheme or meter. This choice makes the poem feel casual and confessional, as if she's whispering her story into the reader's ear rather than writing a formal composition.

However, this free verse is also compressed into regular quatrains (or four-line stanzas) with roughly even line lengths—a regularity that subtly hints this opinionated speaker might be constrained by her circumstances. As readers will soon see, her constraints will have serious consequences.

LINES 5-7

I longed for ...
... the frenzied crowd.

The poem's speaker admits to yearning for Rome (where she comes from) and for another man. She feels both stuck and sexually unfulfilled in her marriage, but still, she cannot take action beyond longing for a different life. No matter how she "long[s] for Rome, home, someone else," she can't make any real moves toward her desires. Despite the speaker's high position in society as the wife of an important Roman official, she has little freedom.

Notice how the internal rhyme of "Rome, home" emphasizes a long assonant /o/ sound, evoking a plaintive "Oh!" of longing.

The poem shifts when the speaker, "bored stiff" by both her life and her husband, finally decides to rebel against Pontius by disguising herself and sneaking out with her maid, joining a crowd gathered to greet the famous prophet Jesus. Here, the poem alludes to the biblical scene in which Jesus enters Jerusalem, humbly riding a donkey, and is greeted like a king by an awestruck crowd—much to the displeasure of the Roman authorities, who don't like any threats to their own power!

From the moment the speaker sees "the Nazarene" (that is, Jesus, who was from the small town of Nazareth), he is Pilate's opposite. Whereas Pilate bores his wife, Jesus has drawn a crowd and whipped them into a "frenz[y]." Jesus is charismatic and magnetic in ways that Pontius, despite being a governor, is not, setting up an important juxtaposition between the two

men.

LINES 8-12

I tripped, clutched ...
... to the gates.

The second stanza ends on a surprising enjambment. Rather than closing the stanza at the end of a sentence, the speaker carries an idea over a stanza break:

> I tripped, clutched the bridle of an ass, looked up
> and there he was. His face? Ugly. Talented.

"He," of course, is Jesus himself—and the enjambment here mirrors both the speaker's stumble and her surprise as she looks into this powerful figure's face for the first time. He might be "ugly," but she's still immediately transfixed.

Describing Jesus as both "ugly" and "talented," the speaker suggests that what's attractive about Jesus is his charisma, not any kind of ordinary physical beauty. Even more importantly, the speaker says, Jesus looks at her and truly sees her:

> He looked at me. I mean he looked at *me*. My God.
> His eyes were eyes to die for. [...]

The repetitions here suggest that being really *looked* at, really noticed, is what truly matters to the speaker. Jesus, she feels, sees her as an individual, a real person—as opposed, readers can guess, to the way Pilate looks at her. The line "his eyes were eyes to die for" might also make a dark joke, foreshadowing the thousands of years of Christian history in which countless saints and martyrs *would* die for Jesus's sake.

The speaker's interaction with Jesus is memorable but brief. Before the speaker can say anything, Jesus is gone, his "rough men" (that is, his lower-class disciples) pushing their way through the crowd towards the gate of the city. The poem juxtaposes Jesus with Pontius Pilate by describing Jesus as more traditionally masculine, from his tough, unrefined features to the "rough men" surrounding him.

The speaker's conversational tone makes this dramatic encounter feel funny, playful, and tongue-in-cheek, not dramatic. When Jesus meets her eyes, she exclaims "my God": words that make her sound more like she's saying "Phew, he was dreamy" than like she's hailing the Son of God!

LINES 13-16

The night before ...
... sweating, sexual, terrified.

Now the speaker leaps over several days in the biblical narrative, skipping the story of Jesus's arrest and jumping to the night before his trial and execution. That night, she recalls, she had a memorable dream.

This moment alludes to a scene in the Bible in which Pilate's wife warns her husband not to crucify Jesus because she "suffered" in a dream of him. In Duffy's telling of this dream, the speaker feels Jesus touching her. At first, it seems as if she's having a sex dream about him. Then she begins to feel pain, and notices that both of Jesus's palms have been "skewered" by nails.

The dream is a premonition, warning her that Jesus will be crucified, but it is also a fantasy, allowing her to be touched by a man other than Pontius. The speaker wakes up both afraid and aroused.

Take another look at these lines:

> His brown hands touched me. Then it hurt.
> Then blood. I saw that each tough palm was
> skewered
> by a nail. [...]

The anaphora in those highlighted words draws attention to a process that at first sounds more like the story of a woman losing her virginity (with pain and drops of blood) than the story of a woman suffering Jesus's crucifixion alongside him! This grim and funny passage thus does two things at once: it presents a premonition of Jesus's death, and it suggests that the effeminate Pilate might never have had sex with his wife.

In these lines, the motif of hands returns, once more juxtaposing Jesus with Pilate. Jesus's hands are "brown" and "tough," where Pilate's are "pale" and "mothy." Jesus's touch is also much more sexually appealing to the speaker than Pilate's.

Though Jesus's hands are physically stronger and manlier than Pilate's, they can't save him: he is executed by having nails driven through his palms. Pilate, on the (literal) other hand, uses his hands to "clap for grapes" or command his soldiers to "seize" Jesus: his weak hands are powerful instruments. Despite his effeminacy, he still has more authority than Jesus in a power structure that rewards class above all else. Entrenched male power, this juxtaposition suggests, isn't all about traditional masculinity!

LINES 17-20

Leave him alone ...
... up his sleeves

After her dream, the speaker decides to take action and sends a note to her husband warning him to leave Jesus alone. Even though she gets dressed "quickly" and hurries to her husband's side, Jesus has already been marked for execution by the time she arrives. "Crowned with thorns" (that his, wearing a crown of thorns, which Roman soldiers placed on his head to mock the idea that he was a king), he's about to be dragged off to the horrible fate the speaker dreamed of.

The speaker notes that at the trial, the crowd is "baying for

Barabbas"—another Biblical allusion. On the day of Jesus's execution, Pilate summoned a crowd and allowed them to request that a single prisoner be pardoned, rather hoping they'd choose Jesus; Pilate felt that Jesus might be innocent, but wouldn't make a stand for him. Instead of choosing Jesus, the crowd voted to pardon Barabbas, a thief.

By the time the speaker arrives, then, it is too late for her to save Jesus—but not too late for her husband to intervene. However, in line 19, Pilate sees the speaker—who, remember, has already begged him to spare Jesus—and decides to ignore her, turning away from her and rolling up his sleeves to wash his hands. The small gesture shows just how powerless the speaker is in her marriage and in society: even after begging her husband for help, she is unable to save Jesus. Pilate, by contrast, is all-powerful but unwilling to help.

LINES 21-24

and slowly washed ...
... believed he was.

The speaker watches Pontius wash his "useless, perfumed" hands before the crowd. Symbolically, this moment suggests he's "washing his hands" of blame for Jesus's death. The speaker uses the moment as an opportunity to insult her husband's femininity and his idleness one last time.

Then, the speaker can only watch helplessly as Roman soldiers grab Jesus and drag him to "the Place of Skulls"—that is, Golgotha, the hill where Jesus was crucified. The speaker is unable even to go and watch the execution; instead, she says, she got the story from her maid, who "knows all the rest."

Here, the poem juxtaposes the speaker's lack of freedom in her marriage with her maid's ability to travel the city and hear all the gossip, in spite of her lower class. The fact that the speaker has to hear secondhand what happened to Jesus once again suggests that her wealth and power are really only illusory. As a married woman, she's essentially a prisoner, unable to save Jesus or even to witness his fate.

The poem closes with the speaker using a rhetorical question to ask: "Was he God?" The answer, to her, seems clear: "Of course not," she quips. However, "Pilate believed he was." In one way, this line is just another dig at Pilate's intelligence: if a fool like Pilate believed Jesus was God, the speaker suggests, Jesus *couldn't* have been God. But this line also darkly observes that there's something very wrong with a world in which a powerful-but-spineless man can believe he's met God himself—and still send him to his execution to avoid trouble. Pilate's power is meaningless (and dangerous) because he's too cowardly to wield it in the name of anything but his own pleasure.

The strong-willed, witty, frustrated speaker, meanwhile, is left utterly powerless in a marriage that's more like a jail—all because she's a woman.

SYMBOLS

HANDS

People's hands, in the poem, symbolize their class and their position in society.

Pontius's hands are soft and weak because he has not had to use them: he's a high-ranking governor, not a working man. He uses his hands to command those around him, "clapping for grapes" or instructing his soldiers to "seize" and execute Jesus. Pontius's hands show he's rich and powerful enough to be idle.

Jesus, by contrast, has tanned, "tough" hands. However, unlike Pontius, he has very little political power. Jesus's hands, symbolic of his low class, become his greatest weakness: he is crucified and his palms are "skewered by a nail," eventually killing him. The fact that his hands are physically stronger than Pontius's does him very little good in the end.

This symbol also alludes to the biblical story of the Crucifixion. Pilate infamously washed his hands before executing Jesus, telling spectators that he was symbolically clean of Jesus's blood (since the spectators were the ones who chose to send Jesus to the Cross). Just as in the poem, Pilate's feminine hands belie his real power: his theatrical hand-washing hides the fact that in reality, he *did* have the ability to prevent Jesus's execution.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Firstly, his hands—a woman's. Softer than mine, / with pearly nails, like shells from Galilee. / Indolent hands. Camp hands that clapped for grapes. / Their pale, mothy touch made me flinch."
- **Lines 14-16:** "His brown hands touched me. Then it hurt. / Then blood. I saw that each tough palm was skewered / by a nail."
- **Lines 19-21:** "Pilate saw me, / looked away, then carefully turned up his sleeves / and slowly washed his useless, perfumed hands."

POETIC DEVICES

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition helps the speaker to create a contrast between the effeminate Pilate and the manly Jesus. The speaker uses contrasting descriptions of the two men to reveal their opposite positions in society. Pontius has "pale, mothy" hands, while Jesus's are "brown" and "rough." Pontius is "useless" where Jesus is "talented." Pontius's touch makes the speaker flinch while Jesus's (in her dreams) leaves her "sweating" and "sexual." The juxtaposition between the two characters emphasizes just how cowardly Pontius is and just how

convicted and intense Jesus is.

The poem also juxtaposes the speaker's own powerlessness with Pontius's ability to do whatever he pleases. The speaker has no freedom; she can't live where she chooses, marry whom she chooses, or even leave her house without a disguise. Meanwhile, Pontius, though he's "indolent" and "useless," is also powerful, able to make life-or-death decisions (even if he spinelessly claims they're out of his hands). By juxtaposing the speaker's restricted life with Pontius's immense power and freedom, the poem reveals how oppressive marriage could be for women.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a woman's"
- **Line 3:** "Indolent hands. Camp hands that clapped for grapes."
- **Line 4:** "pale, mothy touch," "made me flinch"
- **Line 5:** "I longed for Rome, home, someone else"
- **Line 6:** "I crept out"
- **Line 13:** "I dreamt of him."
- **Line 14:** "brown hands"
- **Line 15:** "tough palm"
- **Line 16:** "I woke up, sweating, sexual,"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Pilate saw me, / looked away"
- **Line 21:** "his useless, perfumed hands."
- **Line 23:** "My maid knows all the rest."

IMAGERY

Duffy uses vivid visual and tactile imagery to bring her reinterpretation of historical events to life.

The poem begins with a detailed description of Pontius's hands. The speaker uses a simile to compare his "pearly" nails to delicate seashells, suggesting that he is idle and vain, spending more time at the manicurist than at work. The poem's opening line also uses tactile imagery, describing Pilate's repulsive "pale, mothy touch": in other words, when Pilate touches her, the speaker feels as if she's being fluttered over ineffectually (and rather disgustingly) by a big bug. Given how preoccupied and familiar the speaker is with Pilate's hands, it is clear that she is unable to escape the husband she resents.

The poem continues to use tactile imagery to draw attention to characters' hands and to create a sense of danger for Jesus and the speaker. When the speaker sneaks out and encounters Jesus, she suggests that he and his disciples come from a different kind of background than Pilate with her image of his "rough men shouldering a pathway" through the crowd. Those "rough" fellows wouldn't know a nail file if it stabbed them.

Similarly, when the speaker has a prophetic vision of Jesus's execution, she dreams Jesus is touching her with "tough" hands. "Then it hurt," she says, in a moment that invites readers to assume she's describing the pain of a woman's first sexual encounter with a man—suggesting that Pilate might never have had sex with her.

However, that piercing pain is soon displaced onto a premonition of the crucifixion: the speaker sees Jesus's "tough palm[s]," whose toughness once struck her as so powerful, "skewered / by a nail," feeling the pain as if in her own body. All the imagery surrounding Jesus is both exciting and violent, whereas Pilate's touch is soft and "perfumed" but repulsive.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "pearly nails"
- **Line 4:** "pale, mothy touch"
- **Line 12:** "rough men shouldering"
- **Line 14:** "Then it hurt."
- **Lines 15-16:** "each tough palm was skewered / by a nail. "
- **Line 21:** "perfumed hands."

IRONY

"Pilate's Wife" uses irony to subvert the reader's expectations, especially when it comes to which characters have freedom and power. Despite being effeminate and not stereotypically manly, for instance, Pontius Pilate is the most powerful man in the poem.

Throughout the poem, Pilate is contrasted with Jesus. Where Pilate is effeminate and "camp," Jesus is stereotypically masculine, with "tough" hands and striking sexual charisma. It may initially seem, then, that Pontius is weaker than Jesus.

However, it is Pontius who comes out on top. At the end of the poem, despite Jesus's strength and power, Pilate is able to have Jesus executed. The ironic contrast between the two men points out that male power isn't just about "manliness": only men who are born wealthy, like Pilate, have any worldly power, regardless of how traditionally masculine or feminine they are.

The speaker's complete lack of power—despite the fact that she's clever, strong-willed, and married to a very powerful man—is ironic, too. Throughout the poem, the speaker reveals herself to be brave and intelligent. She is bold enough to sneak out and watch Jesus enter Jerusalem, and she repeatedly pokes fun at her husband's laziness and privilege. However, in spite of her smarts and courage, she is unable to save Jesus, not even by appealing to Pontius.

Through its irony, the poem criticizes ironclad structures of classism and sexism.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-21:** "Pilate saw me, / looked away, then carefully turned up his sleeves / and slowly washed his useless, perfumed hands."
- **Lines 22-23:** "They seized the prophet then and dragged him out, / up to the Place of Skulls."

REPETITION

Repetitions highlight the poem's symbolism and emphasize important moments.

One of the most distinctive flavors of repetition in the poem is its diacope on the word "hands," which appears no fewer than five times across the poem. That repetition, besides alluding to the biblical story of Pilate washing his hands to seal Jesus's fate, helps to establish the speaker's disgust at her spineless, lazy, effeminate husband. Take a look at the way the poem uses the word in the first three lines, for instance:

> Firstly, his **hands**—a woman's. Softer than mine,
> with pearly nails, like shells from Galilee.
> Indolent **hands**. Camp **hands** that clapped for grapes.

There's not just diacope on the word "hands" itself here. There's also parallelism in the speaker's description of those hands, drawing special attention to her disdainful adjectives: "indolent" and "camp." Later on, by contrast, Jesus's hands are "tough" and "brown," work-worn and earthy compared to Pilate's manicured fingers.

Repetitions also suggest just how fascinating the speaker finds Jesus. When she meets him in a crowd, she recalls:

> He **looked at me**. I mean **he looked at** *me*. My God.
> His **eyes** were **eyes** to die for.

Notice how the speaker's repetitions here, focusing on glances and eyes, stress that the speaker feels truly *seen* by Jesus and reveal how lonely and trapped she feels in her marriage to Pontius. Something as small as a glance is enough to make her feel appreciated.

This encounter makes such an impression on her that she dreams about Jesus. Listen to her anaphora as the dream turns strange:

> His brown hands touched me. **Then** it hurt.
> **Then** blood. [...]

That repeated "then" invites readers to imagine a *process*—and one that, at first, sounds more like a deflowering than a premonition of Jesus's crucifixion! Here, repetitions wink at the reader, pointing out the dream's odd blend of sexuality and horror.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hands"
- **Lines 10-10:** "He looked at me. I mean he looked at / me / ."
- **Line 14:** "hands"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Then it hurt. / Then blood."
- **Line 21:** "hands"

ALLUSION

"Pilate's Wife" is based on the story of Jesus's crucifixion. As a result, the poem contains many allusions to both biblical and historical events.

In the poem's second line, for example, the speaker compares her husband's nails to seashells from Galilee, a region where Jesus often preached. This allusion places the poem in time and space (as well as suggesting that Pilate spends plenty of time at the salon).

The next major biblical allusion occurs in the fourth stanza, when the speaker dreams of Jesus's crucifixion. In the Bible telling of the crucifixion story, Pilate's wife has a dream about Jesus which causes her "great suffering" (and, one imagines, considerably less pleasure than the version of the dream in this poem). Duffy fleshes out this short line from the Bible to suggest that Pilate's wife might have had more complicated feelings about Jesus than pure awe or pity.

Finally, the scene of Jesus's trial and execution is filled with biblical allusions:

- When the speaker hears the crowd "baying for Barabbas," she's describing the famous scene in which Pilate presents two prisoners to the crowds of Jerusalem and offers to let one go. The crowd chooses the thief Barabbas over Jesus.
- Jesus's "crown of thorns" was the mocking, torturous one the Roman soldiers forced him to wear on the day of his death, ridiculing the idea that this apparently powerless man was the Messiah.
- Perhaps most important is the image of Pilate washing his hands. In this symbolic scene, Pilate, in a fatal moment of cowardice, behaves as if he has no power to prevent Jesus's death even though he knows that he does—and feels that Jesus is innocent. By literally and figuratively "washing his hands" of the situation, he abdicates his responsibility.

These vivid details, integral to the poem's plot, also add to the nightmarish atmosphere and make the familiar biblical story more lifelike.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Galilee"
- **Line 4:** "Pontius"
- **Lines 5-6:** "When the Nazarene / entered Jerusalem,"
- **Line 13:** "The night before his trial, I dreamt of him."

- **Lines 18-23:** "the Nazarene was crowned with thorns. / The crowd was baying for Barabbas. Pilate saw me, / looked away, then carefully turned up his sleeves / and slowly washed his useless, perfumed hands. / They seized the prophet then and dragged him out, / up to the Place of Skulls. "

VOCABULARY

Galilee (Line 2) - A seaside region where Jesus often gave sermons.

Indolent (Line 3) - Lazy.

Camp (Line 3) - Theatrically effeminate.

Pontius Pilate (Line 4, Line 24) - The Roman governor who oversaw Jesus's crucifixion.

The Nazarene (Lines 5-6, Line 18) - Jesus—so called because he came from the town of Nazareth.

Jerusalem (Lines 5-6) - The city where Jesus died and was resurrected, according to the Bible.

Ass (Line 8) - A donkey—in this instance, Jesus's donkey! Christ was said to have entered Jerusalem riding on donkey-back.

Barabbas (Line 19) - In the biblical story of the Crucifixion, Barabbas was a thief who, by popular vote, was pardoned instead of Jesus, evading the death penalty.

Place of Skulls (Lines 22-23) - The hill (also known as Golgotha) where Jesus and other prisoners were crucified.

The Prophet (Lines 22-23) - Jesus.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Pilate's Wife" is made up of 24 lines broken into six quatrains (or four-line stanzas). It is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't stick to any regular meter or rhyme scheme—a choice that makes the speaker's voice sound intimate and confessional, as if she's telling this story to readers in private.

The poem's stanza breaks usually mark a change in subject or scene: most of the stanzas come to a neat and self-contained ending. However, from time to time, the poem uses enjambment to carry a scene across stanzas for emphasis or dramatic effect. For example:

- Stanza two ends with the speaker tripping and looking up, the pause leaving the reader anticipating what she will see. Stanza three begins with "and there he was," making Jesus's entrance into the poem that much more dramatic.
- Similarly, the fifth stanza ends with the image of Pontius "carefully turning up his sleeves," leaving the reader holding their breath, hoping that he will act to prevent Jesus's execution. The final stanza, however, begins with "and slowly washed his useless, perfumed hands." The reader learns that Pontius will not halt the execution at the same time that the speaker does.

METER

"Pilate's Wife" is written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't use a steady meter. The poem's flexible, conversational rhythms help it to read like an intimate confession straight from the mouth of Pilate's wife, without the restrictions of a traditional form or regular meter.

However, the poem does use roughly consistent line lengths and predictable quatrains, making the poem *look* pretty orderly on the page. Perhaps this foursquare shape subtly suggests how constricted the speaker feels by her unhappy marriage, her frustrated desires, and her powerlessness in a man's world.

RHYME SCHEME

Because "Pilate's Wife" is a free verse poem, it does not have a regular rhyme scheme. Though the speaker does use moments of internal rhyme for rhythm and emphasis—for instance, "I longed for Rome, home" in line 5 or "eyes to die for" in line 11—there's very little rhyme here in general.

The poem's lack of rhyme gives it an informal, conversational tone. The speaker seems to be speaking directly to readers, confiding in them, complaining about her husband and confessing to her secret desires.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is the wife of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor responsible for Jesus's crucifixion. By retelling a familiar biblical story from the point of view of a character who has historically been overlooked, the poem calls into question women's role in society at the time.

Fed up with her lazy, effeminate husband, this poem's speaker is full of frustrated desires. Her pent-up energy makes her rebellious. Sneaking out to see what the big fuss is when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, she witnesses many of the biblical story's key moments: she sees Jesus enter the city, watches his trial, and even has a premonition about his death. However, she is unable to change the outcome of the story, no matter how hard she tries; Jesus is executed in the end. This shows how little power the speaker—and other women—historically held.

SETTING

The poem takes place in Jerusalem at the time when Jesus was crucified. Run by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, this is a dangerous city under a strong imperial thumb. Jesus's dramatic arrival presents a threat to the established order that Pilate represents.

The poem's speaker includes passing details about the setting in her descriptions and imagery, giving the poem a subtle sense of place. In the first stanza, for example, she compares her husband's manicured nails to seashells from the Sea of Galilee. And her easy reference to the "Place of Skulls"—the notorious execution hill also known as Golgotha—suggests she well knows how gruesome Roman justice looks.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

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

"Pilate's Wife" appears in her collection *The World's Wife* (1999), a darkly funny collection that reflects on the struggles of being a woman in a sexist world. The poems in *The World's Wife* are monologues in the voices of mythical and historical women from Medusa to Frau Freud to Mrs. Midas. By giving these largely silent figures their own say, Duffy offers feminist critiques of myth, history, and literature.

Duffy's poetry often tackles current events and issues: she has written poems about the war in Afghanistan, the climate change crisis, and the FIFA World Cup. But she also frequently returns to myth and legend, often using old stories to illuminate modern issues. Duffy's recent poetry collection *Grimm Tales*, for example, is a modern retelling of eight traditional fairy tales.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Pilate's Wife" is a modernized retelling of a historical (and legendary) event: Jesus's trial and execution. Accused of blasphemy for claiming to be the son of god, Jesus was brought before Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem. According to the biblical telling of this story, Pilate at first looked for a way to release Jesus, thinking him essentially innocent. But at last, spinelessly, he "washed his hands" of the whole situation, denying his own responsibility and letting an angry crowd decide whether or not Jesus would die. The rest, of course, is history, both biblical and global.

Published in 1999, the poem uses contemporary, colloquial language to modernize this story. By telling the tale from the perspective of Pilate's nameless wife—who was said to have begged her husband not to let Jesus die—Duffy gesture at the still-real difficulties of being a disenfranchised woman in a man's world (or, for that matter, a woman married to a man she doesn't think much of). In this way, "Pilate's Wife" is both a historical poem and a product of the time in which it was written.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to "Pilate's Wife" read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2GmHBcfoV4)
- A Brief Biography — Read a short biography of Carol Ann Duffy. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- The World's Wife — Read more poems from The World's Wife, the collection in which "Pilate's Wife" was published. (https://genius.com/albums/Carol-ann-duffy/The-worlds-wife)
- Duffy as Laureate — Watch a brief interview with Duffy in which she discusses becoming the first woman Poet Laureate of the UK. (https://youtu.be/wnt5p1DGD9U)
- Pontius Pilate — Learn more about Pontius Pilate, one of the central characters of the poem. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pontius-Pilate)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Anne Hathaway
- Before You Were Mine
- Circe
- Death of a Teacher
- Demeter
- Education For Leisure
- Eurydice
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- In Your Mind
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Aesop
- Mrs Darwin
- Mrs Lazarus
- Mrs Midas
- Mrs Sisyphus
- Originally
- Penelope
- Prayer

- Quickdraw
- Recognition
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- The Good Teachers
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well
- Work

HOW TO CITE

MLA

McDonald, Emily. "*Pilate's Wife.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2022. Web. 19 Sep 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

McDonald, Emily. "*Pilate's Wife.*" LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2022. Retrieved September 19, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/carol-ann-duffy/pilate-s-wife.