

Pennyanne Windsor

'Dancing Woman 1'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Pennyanne Windsor moved to Swansea as an adult, having spent her childhood growing up in the west of England. Having worked as a teacher and a youth worker Windsor became a full-time poet and short story writer, with her first poetry collection, *Heroines*, published in 1984. In addition to a further five poetry collections, Windsor has also published *Out of Sight*, a study of the lives of young women in Swansea. She is a performance poet and jazz musician.

Much of Windsor’s writing focuses on exploring how women are represented and how their own identity is shaped by the world around them.

(A brief biography is available in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens)

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

There is a sense of ambiguity about the title of the poem, created by the term 'Dancing Woman 1' which carefully conceals the identity of the woman. The generic nature of the title may be read as being symbolic of any woman who dances in the way described by the poem and is at odds with the many interpretations of female identity which are explored in the body of the poem. The title also has faint echoes of the form of title often used for paintings and artwork, indicating that the lines which follow create a series of images of female identity which the reader is invited to visualise and study, as they might a work of art.

Form.

In spite of its varied and irregular structure, there is a sporadic rhythm to the poem which reflects the liberal nature of the dance it describes. There is very little punctuation in the poem and the lines run freely, with phrasing left to the interpretation of the reader. Consequently, the structure and form used by the speaker create a tone of freedom and fluidity within the poem. The poem benefits from being spoken aloud, reflecting Windsor's work as a performance poet. The statements gradually get longer and longer. Some of the longer lines become quite comic in their mundane detail, but the building rhythm of the lines also have a momentum that suggests flight or dance. There are a number of rhyming couplets in the poem, used at various intervals by the speaker, the function of which is discussed in more detail in the line by line analysis below.

Lines 1-7.

The poem begins with an un-capitalized word, creating the impression that the reader is being drawn into the middle of a story. The distinction made in these opening lines also immediately establishes the difference between the life of the woman '**by day**', as opposed to her life at night. This first stanza reads much like a list, the poet states that '**I go to work / and cook and shop and sew and mop**', listing the chores the speaker completes each day. Unlike the first two lines which do not rhyme and so seem to stand alone in their statements of fact, the lines which list the activities undertaken by the woman in the poem either have internal rhymes ('**shop**' and '**mop**' in line 3) or are written in rhyming couplets ('**place**' and '**face**', '**spouse**' and '**house**'). These couplets emphasise the repetitive and frustrating nature of the tasks the woman performs each day, leaving readers with a sense that these labours are neither enjoyable, nor particularly significant, to the woman who carries them out. Moreover, the couplets seem to prevent the poem from moving forward, with each line ending with an echo of the previous one.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

This opening stanza also sets up the idea that the woman's life in the daytime is a façade as she undertakes her daily life **'with a pretty smiling face'** to maintain an outward appearance of perfection and happiness. The speaker also lists her possession of **'two library tickets and a mortgage'** as if these items are an important part of her identity and perhaps afford her a certain societal status or veneer of respectability. It is interesting to note that the speaker seems to regard maintaining the **'pretty smiling face'** and attending **'a keep fit class'** as further duties which she has to perform, listing them as a part of her daily routine. Similarly, the speaker states that she has **'three children and a spouse'**, suggesting that she believes this information to be important to her identity (though they lack any individuality in this list-like format). As a result, the stanza creates an image of a female life which is carefully ordered, defined primarily by the woman's role as a mother, wife and homemaker. The significance of outward appearance and fitness are placed in a central position by the speaker, suggesting that she also regards these as being an essential part of her daily duties as a woman.

Lines 8-11.

The second stanza is much shorter than the first and reverses the rhythmic pattern of the first stanza by opening with rhyming couplets. Now focusing on what happens **'late at night'** and **'out of sight'**, the first two lines of this second stanza present an insight into a different side of the speaker and her identity. The fact that the speaker now turns her attention to what happens in secret, in the dark of night, is in sharp contrast to the public-facing version of the woman with which we were presented in the first stanza. Instead of the list of daily tasks which appear to define the woman's life in the daytime, the speaker declares that at night **'I throw my clothes away'**, simultaneously shedding the concerns with appearance which surfaced in the first stanza. The night time seems to embolden the woman and she is no longer preoccupied with how she looks, making the moment where the clothes are thrown aside one of liberation. This sense of liberation is further cemented by the announcement that this action takes place so that the woman is able to **'dance'** naked.

At this point in the poem with the words **'and dance'** (line 11) the pattern of rhyming couplets halts, inviting a pause and drawing attention to the statement being made in these two lines – that is throwing her clothes away and emphasising the action of dancing. Unlike the tightly-packed list of multiple jobs and daily tasks, which fills a single line in the first stanza of the poem, the action of dancing is given an entire line, suggesting it is the only action which is important to the woman in the night.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12-20.

We remain with the speaker's description of what happens at night in the third stanza of the poem, but return once again to the list structure and rhyming couplets as the speaker describes the different identities she feels she takes on as she dances naked at night. It is significant that all of the women described by the speaker in this section are clever or rebellious in some way. The list starts with **'a clever witch'** and a **'scheming bitch'**, personas that reflect a calculating nature and a potential dark side, the mirror image of the carefully presented image of 'proper' or respectable femininity which is constructed in the first stanza. The list continues to dismantle stereotypes of female innocence and perfection, playing with feminine archetypes: dancing, the speaker is **'a madonna sick of sainthood'** and **'a mother tired of being so good'**.

Building on this theme for the remainder of the stanza, the speaker rejects images of womanhood which require the female to behave according to specific rules. Significantly the poem does this without invoking the traditional binary of Madonna/Whore, finding other ways to reject the rules of femininity. She is a **'princess who will not go to sleep'** suggesting female agency rather than the docile captive who needs to be rescued. She is a widow who **'will not weep'**, again rejecting dependency but also the susceptibility to emotion associated with femininity. She is a school girl who decides that **'she will not be a wife'**. Dancing naked at night acts to free the speaker from the stereotypes (all associated with heterosexual union) which define her life in the daytime, leaving her **'an Independent woman'**. Significantly, the 'I' in the word 'Independent' is capitalised, emphasising the importance of the self in this act of dancing and reinforcing the idea that the dance is about the woman's identity and is not dependent upon anyone else.

Lines 21-28.

Building on the sense of independence and freedom presented in the previous two stanzas, the speaker now reiterates the idea that at night **'I might be anyone'**. There is a sense of optimism and possibility within this statement as the speaker no longer appears to feel tethered to a single form of identity.

The repetition of **'at night'** (lines 21 and 23) serves as a reminder that it is in the night, when her actions are **'out of sight'**, that the woman truly comes alive and finds her own sense of identity. We are invited to consider the nature of the constraining gaze she is avoiding. These lines echo those in the poem's opening stanza, but now the attributes which previously defined the speaker's life are cast aside like the clothes she throws away. The confession that the speaker **'discard(s) my children and my spouse'**, along with the keep fit class (is her body freer for this?), library tickets (with their polite but limited sense of cultivation) and mortgage (and the security and entrapment it represents) demonstrates the way in which the speaker's entire sense of identity is altered by her actual or imagined experience of dancing naked.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Once again, the action of dancing is placed on a line on its own, making it the focus of the speaker's admission. The act of dancing as both metaphor and actual activity requires no other justification and in the moment of dancing the speaker relies on no one else in order to define her identity as a woman.

Lines 29-40.

In the poem's closing stanza the speaker returns to the fact that her night time dancing has remained a **'secret'** which **'no one has guessed'**. The reassertion that this dancing is a secret and not something which others know about furthers the concept of the woman's dancing as being an act which is illicit and something which the speaker has **'confess(ed)'** to the complicit reader. The confession works to make the reader complicit in the woman's secret and also implies that this hidden act of dancing is a secret which could be uncovered at any time by a careful observer. The confession also arguably constructs the *implied* audience as female – another woman who will recognise the dance, the wild inner life under a curated and demure exterior. What is it like to read this confession delivered to a male audience?

In the final few lines the speaker returns to the difference which exists between her identity and persona in the day and in the night. The speaker describes how **'walking down the street'** with **'hair neat, make up discreet'** she maintains an outward appearance from which the only clue of her night time dancing is the occasional **'tap'** on a paving stone or a **'skip between the cracks'**, which perhaps recalls a child's game as much as a dance. Such actions are described as having the ability to **'unwittingly betray'** the woman's secret, suggesting that the side of her character which dances naked at night cannot be entirely concealed and has infiltrated her daily life, however subtly. The speaker returns to rhyming couplets again in this section as elements of her daily life are described, yet as with previous stanzas, this pattern is abandoned in the lines which repeat the speaker's action to 'throw [her] clothes away' and 'dance'. The poem ends with this act of liberation, leaving us with the image of the woman dancing free and uninhibited.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

This is a feminist celebration of an untamed inner self. The woman's nakedness suggests something primal, while the sense of liberation from heteronormative marital structures and feminine roles directly address the stifling nature of conventional, gendered behaviour. The dancer doesn't mention music, suggesting that the beats or tunes come from within.

At first glance, the structure and lack of punctuation in this poem can appear quite challenging to the reader. Yet the way in which the lines run together, freely, without punctuation at the end of each line, helps to create a breathless tone to the poem and supports the feeling that the reader is being let in on a secret. Read aloud the rhythm of the poem is prominent and familiar from the sometimes breathless beat of performance poetry. It is interesting that the only punctuation in the poem comes in the form of commas used mid-line in the opening and closing stanzas when the speaker lists the tasks and activities associated with her daily life. Consequently, the use of commas in this section can be read as a reminder of a more formal part of the woman's life and reflect the day time in which she believes she presents herself according to expectations of how a woman might be expected to behave. In the sections of the poem where the woman describes her dancing at night, punctuation is abandoned like the clothes the woman sheds and the poem is allowed to flow freely.

In addition to creating a sense of confession, the structure of the poem and the repeated admission that 'I throw my clothes away/and dance' suggests that the speaker is taking delight in admitting her secret to the reader. This is a declaration of liberation. The majority of the poem centres on the night and the woman's dancing, confining her daily life, along with the persona she maintains in the day time, to a smaller section of the poem and presenting it as the least-significant aspect of the woman's identity. It is not the woman's children, spouse or home life which defines the woman, but her act of dancing. The act of listing the rebellious female characters with whom the speaker feels connected through her dancing also reveals a desire to be more than a wife, mother and home-maker. The woman in the poem is searching for a way in which to express an energy she clearly feels, but is unable to express in her daily life. In addition, the liberation she feels as she dances naked allows her to imagine and explore alternative identities, beyond her own. The presentation of a multifaceted identity is not a new concept in women's writing, but is one which the speaker uses here to suggest that female identity is complex. Writing in her landmark study of women's writing in Wales, Katie Gramich has described the latter decades of the twentieth century in particular as being a time of 'awakening' for women writers in Wales.¹ In 'Dancing Woman I' we see this concept of awakening not just in the poem itself, but in a personal sense as the woman appears to experience a sense of awakening of her own identity when she dances naked. It is ironic that this awakening and the discovery of a true sense of identity occurs in secret, at night.

(1) Katie Gramich, *Twentieth Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 106.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

The distinction between day and night is important in the poem, why is this?

Why might the woman feel so concerned with keeping this act of dancing a secret? Does the poem feel confessional or celebratory?

In the poem, the woman addresses her reader directly to share her secret, how does this make you feel as a reader?

The speaker seems particularly concerned with the notion of female identity and the many forms this can take, what does this say about the pressures faced by women in contemporary life?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Windsor tends to avoid overt media work and media resources relating to her writing are quite sparse. The image above is of Windsor delivering a poetry reading in 2015:

https://www.thewi.org.uk/__data/assets/image/0018/125352/2015-04-08-Penny-Anne-Windsor-Poet.jpg

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

An interview with Windsor, discussing her poetry and the inspiration for her writing, recorded in 1982: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FUUpqfxzHVw>

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*Cardiff University,
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