

# Pennyanne Windsor

## 'Heroines'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University  
Prifysgol Abertawe

# CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :  
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 5 SECTION 2 :  
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :  
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :  
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :  
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :  
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

# 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.

The title for this poem is provocative as it claims the women in the poem as heroines, an idea which may at first seem at odds with the scenes of struggle and frustration depicted in the first three stanzas. The title places women firmly at the centre of the poem, with the word 'heroine' being specific to women and setting up the premise that the women in this poem are extraordinary in their own way. Writing in 1986, historian Deidre Beddoe argue that, historically, Wales had been 'a patriarchal society, in which the activities and views of men are held in far higher esteem than those of women'; in Windsor's poem the women and their work take centre stage, with their daily struggle affording them the status of 'heroines'.<sup>1</sup>

## Form.

The poem is constructed in stanzas of varying length and rhythmic pattern, from single lines, to sprawling six-line free verse stanzas which do not sit neatly within the confines of the page. Each stanza serves to depict a different moment in the daily lives of the women on which the poem centres. Although there is variation within the stanzas, there is some regularity of line length (alternating short and long lines) which contributes to the creation of a sense of routine, perhaps reflecting the repetitiveness of the women's lives. Punctuation in the poem is relatively sparse, with lines flowing continuously in a number of places and perhaps representing the seemingly endless nature of the women's work and their lack of rest.

## Lines 1-9.

The women in the poem are introduced by the speaker as '**the terraced women**', who identifies herself as one of them. The first words '**We are**' is an assertive declaration of presence. The women are identified and linked to houses (the terraces) in which they live. The speaker goes on to describe how the women are '**piled row upon row on the sagging, slipping hillsides of our lives**' (lives 2), further extending the metaphor of the houses as a representation of the women's lives, but also suggesting piles of laundry or other domestic matter -plates, washing up, perhaps? There is a sense of sadness in the tone of these opening lines, with the words '**sagging**' and '**slipping**' indicating that the women may feel weary and as if they have very little control over their lives, and suggest the passage of time, even sagging bodies. The fact that the women are '**piled row upon row**' also suggests that they are being forced to live their lives closely together, almost as if they are one entity.

---

(1) Deidre Beddoe, 'Images of Welsh Women' in *Wales: the Imagined Nation, Studies in Cultural and National Identity*. Ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986), p. 228.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The image of the women acting as a single unit is reinforced throughout this first stanza, and the remainder of the poem, by the use of the collective pronouns **'we'** and **'our'** which are used by the speaker to describe the women's actions. As the stanza continues the reader learns how **'we tug reluctant children up slanting streets'**, depicting the collective effort experienced by the women. The challenges they face in the form of having to marshal **'reluctant children'** and navigate **'pushchair wheels wedging in the ruts'** emphasises the physical effort required by the women as they go about their daily lives. The use of words such as 'tug' and 'rut' suggesting that these daily tasks are both laborious and repetitive for the women.

In the midst of this effort, in which the speaker confesses to finding herself **'breathless and bad-tempered'** in the process of shifting **'the Tesco carrier bags'**, there is a moment of fluidity. The bags are passed 'hand to hand' (line 7) and the structure of the lines which describes this movement reflects the action of passing something along, with no punctuation breaking up the lines in which the bags are moved. The movement is clearly practiced, a technique used by the woman to alleviate the discomfort of carrying heavy shopping bags. Again, there is a sense of unity here and the feeling that the efforts of the women, and their children, are well-honed in order to complete these daily tasks. Interestingly, amongst this effort the women **'stop to watch the town'**, looking down from their street and taking a moment to survey their surroundings. The line which follows this pause is set apart from the other stanzas in the poem and consists of the statement that **'The hilltops creep away like children playing games'** (line 9). This moment of appreciation for the landscape which surrounds the town, and the simile likening the hills to playing children, offer a moment of calm and is in contrast to the noise and work of the rest of the poem, though it also suggests that the women's role as mothers colours their perspective even of the landscape in which they live.

## Lines 10-15.

Breaking the moment of tranquillity in the previous line, the second stanza of the poem starts with the image of how **'our other children'** - that is the ones in the playground not the ones who are the hills playing games - **'shriek against the schoolyard rails'**. Unlike the hills who can creep off, the school children are trapped in the socialising institutions of the valley. The women are identified noisily by the calls and bustle of the children. Again the women seem both unified and interchangeable as 'Mandy's mum, John's mum' though the late variation in the use of the words 'mum', 'mother' and 'mummy' in these lines reveals a subtle sense of class or cultural difference between these otherwise tightly knitted lives.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

In spite of their work, the women take a moment to **'wave'** back at the children as they pass the school, although even this act reveals **'hands carried by groceries and too much washing-up'**. The daily labour the women face in their roles as mothers at the heart of their families has left a physical mark on them. Here again there is a faint air of sadness as the women catch **'echoes as we pass of old wild games'**, recalling their own childhoods and a time when they were not burdened with the tasks they face each day in their adult lives, though also perhaps suggesting that their daughters too are moving in line towards a future very similar to their own.

## Lines 16-23.

Stanza three marks the start of the next phase of the day, moving into the afternoon and a lunch of **'more bread and butter, tea'** the women don overalls and begin their next set of jobs. This change is described by the speaker as an act which initially sounds appealing, **'we dress in blue and white and pink and white checked overalls'**, the overalls sounding pretty and the act of dressing in them belying the hard work to come. Once in their nylon overalls – a form of protection that is almost ubiquitous enough to be recognised as a kind of uniform – the women clean their houses and **'scrub the porch'**, before returning to the collective effort of **'sweep[ing] the street'** and **'clean[ing] all the little terraces'** on the hill. There is a sense of unity in the way the women work and a clear structure to their day which they all appear to follow. These acts connect the valleys women to working-class rituals across Britain, but to the image of the Welsh Mam in particular. The effort to keep the houses and the street looking tidy is one which consumes all of the women and for which they appear to take a collective responsibility. In south Wales, to be 'tidy' was a sign of respectability and character as well as domestic order and cleanliness.

## Lines 24-35.

In the final, and longest, stanza of the poem the women share a moment of rest **'before the end-of-school bell rings'**. In this window of opportunity while **'the babies are asleep'**, the women come together to running across the street **'to avoid the rain'** and **'stop by for tea'** at one of the houses. Significantly, the women are again defined by their children and are referred to as **'Mandy's mum', 'Ceri's mum', 'Dave's mum and John's mum'**, rather than by their own names. This act of identifying the women by their children suggests that their identities are now dependent on that of their offspring and that they regard each other in this light. By implication, the women are also all of the same generation, suggesting again a generational path or pattern to life in this community. The mothers who are not explicitly named by the speaker are referred to simply as 'the others', reinforcing the sense that the women do not have distinct identities of their own.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Yet at this meeting of the women, the poem takes on a lighter tone. The speaker describes how **'briefly we are the wild women'**, presenting an image of the women which suggests that their decision to come together for a cup of tea and a chat is in a rebellious action which flies in the face of their domesticity. It also ties them back to the 'old **wild** games' recalled when they see their children in school – perhaps suggesting that they are remembering the conception of the children rather than their own games as youngsters. As they sit together the women transition to **'girls with secrets, travellers, engineer, courtesans, and stars of fiction, films'**. Temporarily freed from their identities as mothers and housewives, the women are free to regress to 'girls' sharing secrets and dreaming of the lives and careers they might have had. As with the other such moments of happiness or reflection in the poem, this scene too is tinged with sadness as the speaker describes how the women are **'plotting our escape like jail-birds'**, providing an insight into how trapped they may feel in their current domestic lives. It is also worth noting that the careers the women envisage are ambitious, revealing a very different side to the women we first saw trudging up the hillside in the opening stanza of the poem, and perhaps signalling what ambitions they might conceive of for their daughters.

In the closing lines of the poem the metaphor of the women as the terraced houses in which they live resurfaces. The women are once again **'terraced'**, adding to the growing sense of entrapment. There is, however, a sense of determination among the bleakness of the speaker's final description of the women as **'Tescoed prisoners rising from the household dust like heroines'**. The women may well feel that they are imprisoned by the chores they have to do, by their responsibilities and even by their tie to the supermarket in which they all shop, but they are also able to see themselves as 'heroines'. The image of the women rising from their housework and emerging as heroines is indicative of their strength and their ability to look beyond the confines of their daily routine. This final image of determined women conquering the challenges of their daily lives and emerging victorious paints a very different image to the struggle presented in the first stanza of the poem and reveals much about the women's ability to persevere.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem works to create an image of the women's lives as dominated by their location and the daily toil and the hard work involved in the routine of domestic duties and childcare. The clearly-defined schedules in the day are marked by each of the stanzas, including brief pauses for rest, rebellion and creative fantasy. In this it resembles a working-class version of Gillian Clarke's famous feminist poem 'Letter from a Far Country' which charts the day of a mother during which her children are at school.

In this poem, the women's children seem rather more present – waving from school and embodied in the hills. The women's bodies too bear the physical scars of their domestic labour, being left 'breathless' and 'scarred' by the tasks they undertake. The moments of reflection and nostalgia which occasionally creep into the speaker's narrative as the women take a moment to look down at the town and reflect on the landscape in line 9, before '**catching echoes**' of their childhood in line 15, are quickly pushed aside so that daily work can continue. There is a sense of purpose about the women's toil, but their frustration is all too clear in the speaker's description of the women as '**prisoners**' and '**jail-birds**'. For these Welsh Mams, to go on is to be heroic.

The women are treated as a collective, even in their rare moments of leisure, suggesting the way in which they have grown together over generations in the environment in which they live. The steep terraced streets and shared experiences of the women have bound them together to the extent that their daily lives and routines have fallen into sync. The only variation from this pattern appears to come in the list of alternative lives that the women might have had, with the diverse list of more conventional 'heroines' – '**travellers, engineers, courtesans and stars of fiction, films**' – finally revealing something more of the women's own identities or the media and literature they consume. In these dreams of what they might have been, the women dream not of continued collectiveness, but of individual success and their own sense of identity, away from the way in which their lives are defined by their household and family roles and responsibilities.

The contrast between the struggle to climb the steep hill, weighed down with shopping and children, in the first stanza and the image of the women rising as heroines in the final stanza is also worth noting. While the ascent they have to undertake to carry their shopping back to their homes every day is hard work, the image of the heroine rising from the household dust is both triumphant and graceful. The women's strength of mind reveals their ability to envisage themselves as heroines, soaring up from their labour and elevating them to a position where their efforts can be recognised and celebrated. This final image provides a glimmer of optimism in the poem and cements the image of the women as being tenacious and committed in their roles, however frustrating they may find their daily grind.

# FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What role do the children play in this poem?

Why do you think the speaker describes the women as 'wild' when they take their break in the final stanza of the poem?

What can you tell about the women's lives from the way the speaker reveals that lunch consists of 'more bread and butter' (line 16)?

What other ways is socio-economic class represented?

Do you think the women are the heroines of the title?

## 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](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=1FUpqfxzHVw>

**DR EMMA  
SCHOFIELD**

*Cardiff University,  
August, 2019*



*We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.*