

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams

'The Sealwife'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3** SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4** SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 11** SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 12** SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 12** SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 13** SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES
- 14** SECTION 7 :
FURTHER READING

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams was born in Kent in 1951, but moved to Wales in 1982. She has lived in west Wales and Waunfelin near Pontypool, and has now settled in Abergavenny. After studying English and Theology at the Southampton University, she forged a successful career as a poet and teacher of creative writing. She has produced five poetry collections: *The Tree Calendar* (1987), *Book of Shadows* (1990) *Animaculture* (1997), *Hummadruz* (2001), and *Greenland* (2003). As the titles of these books might suggest, her poetry is marked by a direct, sensuous engagement with the natural environment, and shows a concerted interest in the myths and literary traditions of her adopted homeland. Described by one critic as one of the ‘radical green voices’ which emerged in Welsh and British poetry over the last decades of the twentieth century, Llewellyn-Williams’s work explores our often destructive relationship – yet deep interdependency with – the natural world, often from a gendered, feminist angle.¹ As a poet, Llewellyn-Williams also demonstrates a faith in the healing powers of the imagination, as well as concern with the hidden workings of the human psyche. She now works full-time as an accredited counsellor.

(1) Terry Gifford, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 165.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'**The Sealwife**' is taken from Llewellyn-Williams's second book of poems, *Book of Shadows* (1990). The poem's title suggests that this text will turn upon the story of a female figure, whose identity is rendered all the more mysterious by the title given to her here. We become aware that the convention of identifying a woman according to her marital status (that is, as a 'wife') acts to obscure who she really is. Is this woman married to a sea creature? How? Or is she herself an animal? If '**Sealwife**' has a certain blunt matter-of-factness to it, it is also mysterious, engendering our desire to find out more about this enigmatic person. It prepares us for a poem that will set out to explore female identity, and how this can be constrained ('sealed' up?) by marriage and social conventions. Yoking together two very different words in a single compound noun, the title indicates that inner division and 'hybridity' (or doubleness) will also be key themes.

Form.

'The Sealwife' offers an imaginative rewriting of the Celtic 'selkie' myth. According to folk traditions associated with the Northern Isles of Scotland, the Faroe Isles and Iceland, the selkie is a magical creature, capable of transforming from a seal into a beautiful, lithe human. Endowed with magical capacities for metamorphosis, the selkie, once transformed into human form, was said to dance on lonely stretches of moonlit shore, or bask in the sun on rocky outcrops. While selkies can be of any gender or age (another name for them is, in the Scots language, *selkie fowk*, seal people), a common theme is one in which a cunning young man acquires the sealskin of a selkie-woman. Prevented from returning to the sea, she is obliged to marry her captor, until, one day, her skin is returned, and she once again heads back to the sea.

As befits the poem's desire to explore its central character's inner world, it takes the form of a lyric, spoken in the first-person voice of '**The Sealwife**' herself, and addressed, as we discover in stanza 3, to an unnamed figure who is supposedly her husband. The lyric poem is the favoured vehicle for expressing personal feelings, and giving a 'voice' to the selkie woman is key to the feminist intentions of this poem. '**The Sealwife**' is comprised of 13 stanzas: 12 three-line tercets, with a fragmentary one-line stanza at the end. The pace of the tercet is often slower and more sombre than the more popular couplet or quatrain (four-line stanza), and here it is used to great effect to evoke the mourning and longing of the selkie for the sea. Tercets are easily read and the flow of the lines evokes the rolling waves of the sea.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The constricted nature of the tercet in terms of lines and words successfully projects the sealwife's sense of frustration in the face of marriage and domesticity, where **'love is trapped between the walls of a house'** (l. 19). Yet the brevity of the form also allows for an impactful concentration of image and narrative, and builds momentum as we sense the selkie's day of escape drawing nearer and nearer (**'It won't be long now'**, l. 35). Although written largely in free verse, the frequent use of iambic pentameter draws this misunderstood creature's speech into the realm of dramatic monologue, elevating and heightening her story. The selkie speaker's economy of speech points to the limits of human-made language, alluding to the thoughts and memories she is unable to express. Uneven rhythms and unconventional grammar and syntax (**'I plunged and swam for my own joy'** (l.17), **'it won't be long now, the waiting'** (l. 35) suggest that this creature is not addressing us in her maternal tongue, but rather in a **'language / learnt slowly, word by word.'** (ll. 21-22).

Lines 1-6.

This poem opens quietly but impactfully with the statement: **'One day I shall find my skin again'** (l. 1). For all the confidence and determination of the emphatic **'I shall'** – an effect heightened by the accentual stress that falls on the first (**'One'**) and third syllables (**'I'**) of the line – the aura of mystery established by the title remains. The colon at the end of line 1 conveys a dramatic pause that leaves several questions hanging. What kind of creature is the speaker? How did she lose her skin? Is she alive, or dead? The punctuation of the first stanza creates a driving momentum that signals the speaker's strength, and eagerness to tell her tale: for all the unusualness of her speech, this is someone – something – who is in control of her own narrative.

The speaker's longed-for **'salt skin'** (l. 2), we realise, is central to her identity, and she dwells at some length on its contour and scent, describing it in terms that engage all the senses. **'[M]y own salt skin'** (l. 2) conjures the taste of sweat and tears on the tip of the tongue, while also suggesting that the sea itself is her skin, with no real separation between herself and the water. **'Folded dark'** (l. 2) is an odd, almost awkward construction: evoking a layered, secret space, its use of **'dark'** rather than, as we might perhaps expect, the adverb **'darkly'**, reinforces the elemental concreteness of the language. Gradually, we receive more clues to the nature of this **'skin'** in the **'fishweed stink / and tang'** (ll. 2-3) whose memory the speaker seems to savour. Evoking the iodine scent of the sea, it also suggests there is something excessive, almost overpowering about this skin – it is an object of disgust, just as the female body has stereotypically been seen as an object of fear or disgust in conservative, patriarchal culture. The **'thick warm fat'** (l. 3), with its layer of protection, generates further maternal associations, while the **'great thrusting tail'** (l. 3) associates the skin with muscular power and movement, blurring gender divisions. This effect of force and forward moment is again reinforced at the level of form, in the alliteration that, drawing on Old English poetry and the tenets of Welsh cyghanedd, extends across half-lines (**'salt skin / stink', 'tang / thrusting tail'**). It is as if the speaker is revelling in the sensory dimensions of language as well as the memory of her skin, while the intricate internal sound correspondences point to the interconnectedness of her sense of the world.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

'[A]ll mine' (ll. 4–5): the speaker proudly announces her ownership over her skin, which we can see in broader terms as a proud assertion of a woman's rightful ownership over her own body, from which she has been dispossessed. The playful, musical rhyme, **'I'll take it and shake it out / to the wind'**, (ll. 4–5) mimics the domestic act of shaking out a carpet or old garment; the suggestion is of a kind of cleansing and renewal. The sealwife's prediction that she will **'laugh softly'** (l. 6) alludes to joy and female pleasure, as well as her triumphant disobedience of the conventional order of things in her imagined assertion of freedom.

Lines 7-12.

The speaker addresses the listener directly, introducing a dialogic element: **'I shall find my stolen skin, hidden by you / for love (you said)'** (ll. 7–8). She begins to reveal the backstory to her search for her skin, which resonates closely with folkloric tales of the selkie: the listener fell in love with her after seeing her in her human form, dancing with the other *selkie fowk* at night, and hid her skin **'in some cleft in the rocks'** (l. 9) so that, unable to resume her animal form, she would be obliged to live with him. The parenthetical **'you said'** reveals that she is answering back to a competing version of this story; it also introduces a note of scepticism, suggesting that the selkie's husband used the idea of romantic **'love'** to justify what was in fact curiosity and the arrogant desire to take possession – even if that meant denying the selkie her freedom of change and self-expression, as symbolised by her dancing. The husband's theft of the sealwife's skin might be seen as a parable for the problematic power relations between not just men and women, but people and nature, too.

The **'cleft in the rocks'** is suggestive of how the sealwife's self-identity is pushed underground. It also speaks of the split in her identity that occurs when she is forced to deny the seal part of her existence. Nonetheless, the fluid musicality of these lines is accentuated by the dactylic metre (**'hidden by you', 'sea-people danced'** (ll. 7–8) and enjambment across the stanzas, as she dreams of the place **'I may not go / but used to go, and dance too, stepping free'** (ll. 9–10). It is as if the language is defiantly enacting the dance that the sealwife has been essentially forbidden to do. The imagery of stanza 4 is markedly strange, almost surreal: **'the 'peeled'** (l. 11) body suggests the freshness and newness of the skin that is revealed each time she assumes human form, like a prawn **'peeled'** of its shell; it also perhaps alludes to the idea that, for the desiring lover, she was nothing more than a delicious fruit, ripe for consumption. The fall of the line break between lines 11–12 enacts a sudden, surrealistic shift in scale: **'The stalks of my legs in the moon-/ light strange, my long arms shaping the sky'** (ll. 11–12). It is as if, in dancing, her body becomes the moon, her legs, alien-like, like vegetal stalks touching the earth; it is an image of a lost interconnection between the earthly and celestial realms, turning ordinary perspective on its head.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13–18.

Again, the enjambment across stanzas hints at a fluidity of memory and ‘excess’ of speech that overflow the narrow confinements of the tercet form (we might recall that ‘sealwife’ is semantically similar to ‘fishwife’, that pejorative idiom for a woman who supposedly talks too much). Here we find the sealwife lamenting that while once **‘my long arms shap[ed] the sky’** (l. 12), implying an almost goddess-like power, now they **‘have narrowed their circles down / to the tasks of these forked hands’** (ll. 13–14). The nature-rituals of the dancing selkie have turned into the gendered rituals of domesticity and motherhood: **‘lifting, /fetching, stirring, scrubbing, embracing’** (ll. 14–15). There is a tangible sense of claustrophobia here, as if the sky itself, not just the movement of her arms, had **‘narrowed’**. **‘[F]orked hands’** is an interesting image; it implies that not only has the speaker’s body become a tool, an instrument of physical labour, but it has also become the very earth that is being worked upon, expected to yield crop (in the form of children). Her **‘forked hands’** offer a suggestive contrast with the ‘whole’ flippers of a seal, whose five digits are webbed, allowing efficient propulsion through the water. The implication is again that, caught as she is between seal and human worlds, the speaker’s identity is not whole, but divided; no longer adapted to her own ‘element’, the water, she has become a ‘stranger to herself’.²

‘Forked’ is also the word used by Dylan Thomas to describe the speech of ‘wise men’ in his poem ‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night’: ‘Because their words had forked no lightning they / Do not go gentle into that good night.’³ Thomas’s poem alludes to the doubleness and splitting of language and identity that scholars see as a cornerstone of Welsh writing in English. We might note, too, that the sealwife seems to follow the advice of Thomas’s speaker to not ‘go gentle’ by refusing quiet acquiescence to her fate.

It is fitting that lines 13 and 16 are the shortest, in terms of syllables, of the entire poem: **‘narrowed their circles down’** (l. 13) and **‘stiff landlocked movements’** (l. 16). The unnatural, mechanical movements to which the speaker is now confined by her life on land is emphasised here by the hard consonant sounds of **‘stiff’** and **‘lock’** (the double ‘ff’ of ‘stiff’, like the double ‘ll’ of ‘small’, emulating in visual terms a double wall or barrier). The sea, we realise, is associated by the speaker with bodily freedom and the ability to take pleasure in her body: as a seal she swam **‘for my own joy’** (l.17). The idea of the sea as a metaphor for transgressive female desire is made apparent here, when she tells us that she **‘loved at will in rolling-belly tides’** (l. 18) – a phrase that, full of movement, again dissolves divisions between the selkie’s individual body and the body of the sea.

(2) See Julia’s Kristeva’s book on the idea of internal foreignness, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1997).

(3) Dylan Thomas, ‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night’, in *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardigan: Parthian, 2007), p. 165.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 19–24.

Moving away from her memories of freedom to consider her present situation, the sealwife reflects on how **'love is trapped between the walls of a house / and in your voice and eyes'** (ll. 19–20). It is not only the sealwife, but love itself that is **'trapped'** by the gender roles and enforced behaviours demanded by domestic, married life. The idea of love as **'trapped...in your voice and eyes'** uses the romantic trope – almost a cliché – of being lost in, and bewitched by, the lover's eyes, to make a feminist comment on the way in which women are seen to have substance and identity only through the male gaze.

The themes of language and identity, female transgression and 'man-made' law, come to the fore clearly in these stanzas. She understands, we are told, the **'boundaries'** (l. 21) of **'our children's cries'** (l. 20). The children's cries mark humans' sense of separation from one another, while also signalling the **'boundaries'** placed on the selkie's freedom by their need for her. These **'boundaries'** are **'a language / learnt slowly, word by word'** (ll. 21–2). She too, has had to learn a human language not her own – one which leaves her little room to manoeuvre, and is certainly no compensation for her **'skin'**.

Stanza 8 complicates what we know about the relationship between the sealwife and her husband, portraying the absent partner in a more positive light than in previous lines. She admits that **'you've been dear and good'** (l. 22), and goes on to exclaim nostalgically, **'how you would sing to me, those wild nights!'** (l. 23). In their mutual love and physical desire, her husband once made attempts to speak *her* language, transforming herself into a kind of sea creature in their shared passion: **'dip[ping] down / to taste my sea-fluids'** (ll. 24–5). The sensuous **'sea-fluids'** contrast with the repulsion implied by the **'fishweed stink'** in the first stanza, while the oil he applies to her breasts seems to recall, in a more attractive and palatable way, the **'thick warm fat'** of her seal skin.

Her husband's ability to physically celebrate and understand the selkie's human form is seen to bring back positive echoes of her animal past. But the suggestion lingers that while her skin appeared powerfully distasteful when she was alone, swimming with a **'great thusting tale'**, it was considered nourishing and alluring when attending to male desires.

We are left to ponder the conundrum: was the sealwife's enjoyment of her sexuality at the price of her solitary freedom?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 25–30.

The poem takes a melancholy turn here, as the speaker remembers the life and creatures she has had to abandon in the name of her current relationship. Forgetfulness – the lovers' gift and curse – is here associated with a loss of identity: **'I'd forget to mourn / those others then, trawling the flickering deeps.'** (ll. 25–6). The sealwife demonstrates feelings of responsibility to the creaturely communities from whence she came: the word **'mourn'** suggests not only that she misses them, but also that their lives have come under threat in a human-dominated world. Her previous life is now buried deep in her psyche, leaving her **'trawling the flickering deeps'** in an attempt to remember. Her past has become like an old film, a flickering memory, and her body and dreams register a loss that her waking mind struggles to remember: **'Now I cry for no reason, and dream of seals'** (l. 27). This is 'the problem that has no name', the profound malaise that feminist Betty Friedan famously diagnosed in American housewives during the 1950s in her book *The Feminine Mystique*.⁴ The poet continues to play with scale in these lines, as the speaker describes how **'an ocean booms in the far cave of my ear'** (l. 28), the external world becoming one with the inner world of the body. Racked by competing calls on her attention, the selkie adopts the conventional position of the domesticated woman: **'I stand here at the window, / listening.'** (ll. 29–30) Her use of the present tense gives her waiting a kind of urgent immediacy, and sound becomes a means of connecting herself with her wider environment.

(4) Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 15.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31-7.

Stanza 11 explores the sealwife's perception of her children and their relationship with her. Challenging assumptions of motherly closeness and tenderness, she admits to a sense of distance between her and her offspring: **'Our children sleep, / and by daylight they run from me'** (ll. 30-1), as if instinctively sensing her difference. The myth that mothers are entirely fulfilled by satisfying their children's emotional needs is questioned here, as they demonstrate their independence. The sense of separation is further emphasised when, in contrast to the changeability and ambiguity of the selkie, the bodies and identities of her human children are portrayed as firm and fixed. This solidity – an effect of their familiarity with solid ground – is highlighted by the use of sibilance, which draws emphasis to their **'strong'** (l. 32) legs, **'straight'** (l. 32) backs, and **'bodies at ease / on solid ground'** (ll. 32-3). There are hints, however, that they may have inherited more from their mother than may have been immediately apparent. They, too, are drawn to undecidable, liminal places: they **'play for hours on the shore'** (l. 33) and **'scramble the wet rocks'** (l. 34), the omission of any preposition perhaps suggesting they are happy to **'scramble'**, rather than fix, identity, as is the usual human way. A sense of anticipation, almost inevitability, is introduced into this part of the selkie's tale: **'It won't be long now, the waiting'** (l. 35). She is like Branwen, the Welsh princess of the *Mabinogion*, waiting at her window in Ireland for her people to come across the sea to rescue her from an unhappy marriage. The poem's ending is ambiguous, fragmentary: **'they love to poke and forage in the cracks / of the cliffs; sharpeyed, calling, waving'** (ll. 36-7). Does this imply that her children are soon to discover her skin hidden in the rocks? The folk tales of the selkie usually end when the skin is returned by one of the selkie-wife's children, who sometimes accompany her to the sea, and sometimes remain on land with their human father. But could these concluding lines also refer to the selkie's seal kind, calling and waving at her to join them? The stand-alone final line conjures a feeling of isolation, an impression of breaking off and away; it is unclear whether this is the isolation the selkie is feeling stuck on the land, away from her community, or the joyous autonomy felt as she swims away with the seals, her children **'calling'** and **'waving'** at her from the land as she sets off into the distance.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**The Sealwife**' concentrates a number of themes threading through *Book of Shadows*: the relationship of the human to the natural world, the interrelatedness of all life forms; and 'outlawed' figures and forms of knowledge. The lost sealskin becomes in Llewellyn-Williams's poem a powerful metaphor for female desire and our inner connection to the creaturely world, which humans have sought to deny or control. Referencing the poet's interest in Renaissance science and magic, '**The Sealwife**' explores thinker Giordano Bruno's claim that 'all parts of the material universe are in continual motion and are continually renewed from within'.⁵ As magical and important a covering as the seal's skin, poetic language is here linked to the endless capacity of the natural universe – and the human mind – for inner transformation and renewal.

The selkie's search for her skin parallels the poem's search for a language capable of expressing the inseparability of self and nature: the poet's arresting use of concrete images, musicality and rhyme calls attention to language's textures and materiality, and in turn, its embeddedness in the natural, fleshly world.

Llewellyn-Williams has admitted that 'I like to work with what's immediate and present, even if we're talking about the past or people and events outside the room', and her use of the first-person voice here grabs the reader with its immediacy and frankness.⁶ Challenging the romantic tradition in poetry of an implicitly male speaker addressing an idealised female love object, it is the male partner who remains all but silent and absent in this account; indeed, it is the sealwife's skin, not the husband, which forms the primary object of her desire. The '**voice and eyes**' of her partner might signal shelter and belonging, but they are also figurative of a language and way of seeing that refuse to fully admit the complexity of her identity.

Caught between cultures and trying to find a voice in a language not originally her own, there are also parallels in the selkie's story with the situation of Welsh writers in English. While the sealwife admits an ambivalence of distance and connection with her family and the human, social world, what is clear is the confident way in which she controls her own narrative, judiciously giving her husband his due while asserting her right to change.

Llewellyn-Williams's rewriting of the story of the selkie has a strange beauty, but nature is never sentimentalised. What emerges is an ecofeminist protest at how human culture works to define, delimit and appropriate women and nature alike; to respect our deep involvement in the processes of the nature, the poem suggests, is also to respect women's right to an autonomy of expression and desire.

(5) Giordano Bruno, quoted in Gifford, *Green Voices*, p. 170.

(6) Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, 'About Me', <https://sites.google.com/site/hilaryllewellynwilliams/about-me> [Accessed 20 May 2020].

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What sort of person is the sealwife? How do we know?

How is nature presented in the poem? Pick out some interesting images.

How does the speaker feel about her life on land?

Is this poem happy or sad in outlook?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
(links active May 2020)
All links are clickable

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams

(<https://sites.google.com/site/hilaryllewellynwilliams/about-me/Hilaryw.jpg?attredirects=0>)



Photograph by Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, permission granted 1.6.20.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Orkneyjar, *The Selkie-folk*:

orkneyjar.com/folklore/selkiefolk

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams reading her poem 'An Eye Test':

youtube.com/watch?v=yf1n5Ksejb8

The Poetry Foundation's collection of poetry addressing the natural world and ecology, with a helpful summary of the history of environmental poetry:

poetryfoundation.org/collections/146462/poetry-and-the-environment

Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Ecofeminism*:

britannica.com/topic/ecofeminism

FURTHER READING

Aaltonen, Heli. 'Selkie Stories as an Example of Ecosophical Storytelling', in Shifra Schonmann (ed.), *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), pp.153-158

Entwhistle, Alice. *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Rewriting Contemporary Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales. Press, 2013)

Gifford, Terry. *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)

Puhvel, Martin, 'The Seal in the Folklore of Northern Europe', *Folklore* 74/1 (1963), 326-33



**DR SIRIOL
MCAVOY**

*CREW, Swansea University
May 2020*

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