



University
of Glasgow

Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for National 5 English:

Len Pennie's 'Little Girls'



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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on the Scottish Poetry Collection for National 5. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

‘Little Girls’ was written by Len Pennie. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author and publisher. Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

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Context

Poem overview

The title ‘Little Girls’ reflects how society often treats and perceives women as vulnerable or powerless. The poem subverts this infantilisation, transforming ‘little girls’ from a symbol of weakness into one of strength and rebellion. The final lines reclaim the phrase to represent a collective force of resilience and defiance.

The poem focuses on one girl, whose experiences represent the challenges faced by women and girls across the world. The poem can be divided into a series of connecting themes, which portray the girl’s journey from oppression to empowerment:

- **Oppression and suffering** (lines 1–8): the poem introduces a girl whose life is shaped by suffering, judgement and fear, represented by the imagery of wounds, starvation, and predators.
- **Dismissal and invalidation** (lines 9–18): a collective male voice dismisses the girl’s struggles and suggests that she is making a fuss over nothing. This section highlights how certain societal structures silence women and excuse harmful behaviour.
- **Conformity and restriction** (lines 19–30): the girl suppresses her desires and actions and learns to shrink herself physically and emotionally in order to survive. This reflects how certain societal expectations prevent women from fully embracing their identity.
- **Resistance and empowerment** (lines 31–36): the girl joins forces with other women to present a collective declaration of strength, resilience, and change.

Author background

Len Pennie is a spoken-word poet from Airdrie, Lanarkshire, who writes and performs in Scots and English. She was raised in a Scots-speaking household and now advocates for the recognition of Scots as a legitimate language, often using her platform to promote its use. Pennie is a columnist for *The Herald* and has contributed to the *Times Educational Supplement* on the use of Scots in education. She also presents The Arts Mix on BBC Radio Scotland, which looks at what’s happening in art and culture across the country.

Pennie became well known during the COVID-19 lockdown in Scotland for her ‘Scots word of the day’ videos posted on Twitter and TikTok. On these platforms, she began sharing video performances of her poems. Pennie has spoken about the abuse, including misogynistic slurs, that she has been subjected to online and its impact on her mental health. In November 2024, she collaborated with Border Women’s Aid on its campaign ‘Border Voices Against Abuse’, which encourages communities to take action to end domestic violence and gender-based abuse. Pennie advocates for the destigmatisation of mental illness.

Publication details

‘Little Girls’ is published in Pennie’s debut poetry collection, *Poyums* (Canongate, 2024), which won the Scots Book of the Year at the Scottish Language Awards in 2024. Written in Scots and English, the collection explores themes such as feminism and women’s rights, language and cultural identity, mental health, and community and solidarity. *Poyums* includes ‘An Interview with the Author’, in which Pennie states: ‘I want to see equality: of gender, of race, of sexuality, both in and outwith Scotland, and I want to continue to ensure my work is as intersectional as possible to help realise that goal’ (p. 193).

Online resources

[Len Pennie’s Poyums of Power](#): a 9-minute programme recorded for BBC Scotland. Pennie talks about growing up with Scots, her struggles with mental health, and the dangers of online trolling.

Students can watch Pennie perform her poems on her [YouTube channel](#) and [TikTok account](#), which also feature her ‘Scots Word of the Day’ videos.

[Little Girls](#): Len Pennie performing the poem on her YouTube channel.

The version of 'Little Girls' printed here and published on the [Scottish Poetry Library website](#) is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards. (The poem itself is not covered by the CC BY-NC-SA license.)

'Little Girls'

by Len Pennie

The little girl stands on a knife-covered ledge,
Dancing till blood starts to drip from its edge.
She's been licking her wounds since the first time she bled,
Getting judged for each thought she commits in her head.
She's been starving herself since she started to eat,
Connecting the dots of her heart's every beat.
She's been swimming from fishermen hiding their net,
And running from wolves that deny they're a threat.

And the men chime in, 'Silence girl, don't make a fuss,
I'd never do this, it's not all of us.'

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To drown out her sorrow, the male chorus sings,
'It's only a few, you're imagining things.
You're making this issue seem worse than it is;
It was only a comment, a gesture, a kiss.
It was meant as a compliment – please take a joke,
Don't bite the hand groping you, savour each poke.'
And the girl learns the axis on which the world spins
Is powered by people who relish their sins.
So, she keeps her head down and she learns how to live,
To be quiet and not take much more than they give.
Cause the fragile knife edge she must constantly walk
Dictates every word she's permitted to talk,
Each mouthful is measured, each glance not too sly,
Lest she melt off her wings just from touching the sky.
And she'd love to exist as the person she knows
Lives inside of her mind, but her agony grows.

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As she slowly but surely resigns herself to
Being smaller and using far less than they do,
Being meeker and not taking up too much space,
Being careful to always remember her place.
But the little girl vows that the curse will be broken,
She'll break down the barriers, leave them wide open:
For the daughters of little girls you wouldn't hear;
For the children of women you silenced with fear;
For our mothers we'll sing till the screams rip the air;
We are the little girls you couldn't scare.

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Feminism and #MeToo

‘Little Girls’ aligns with feminist discourse that advocates for women’s rights, opportunities, and freedoms. The girl’s journey from oppression to empowerment demonstrates the importance of fighting for a better future for the next generation.

The #MeToo Movement was founded by survivor and activist Tarana Burke in 2006, working to challenge sexual violence and bring support to victims. In 2017, spurred on by reports of multiple abuse allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein, ‘#MeToo’ went viral on social media platforms including Twitter. Relevant tweets could be found by searching related hashtags, which allowed people without large audiences to contribute to this conversation and express their own feelings and experiences. While initially about workplace misconduct, the movement broadened more generally into a condemnation of all sexual violence.

The movement reached people worldwide and by making sexual abuse a global conversation, it forced a reinterrogation of systems that enable misconduct and protect abusers. #MeToo pushed for a culture that was less tolerant of sexual violence, and the popularity of the movement saw many previously powerful figures losing jobs after accusations against them were made. The movement can be seen to have facilitated changes in law, such as changes to the UK’s Sexual Offences 2003 Act and the abolition of some ‘statutes of limitations’ in the United States, meaning victims could report historical crimes.

‘Little Girls’ is a reflection of the struggles, silencing, and resistance at the heart of the #MeToo movement. The poem exposes the ways in which women are conditioned to endure mistreatment while ultimately emphasising female strength, collective resistance, and the demand for change.

Full analysis

Form and structure

‘Little Girls’ is written in rhyming couplets and maintains a consistent four-beat rhythm (tetrameter), though it does not follow a strict metrical pattern in terms of stress placement or syllable count. The interplay of rhyme, enjambment, and repetition creates a

flow well-suited to performance poetry. Variations in stress and line length prevent the rhythm from becoming too predictable; longer lines enhance its narrative quality, while shorter lines create a sense of urgency. These different elements help to maintain the momentum of the poem and enhance its emotional intensity and message.

In 'An Interview with the Author', Pennie describes herself as:

first and foremost a performance poet, and having that rhythm and rhyme is really important to me. I also like having a juxtaposition of these themes which are uncontrollable and uncontainable trapped in the confines of tight wee rhyme. Feels like a prison for the things I don't like and a hug for the ones I do.

(*Poyums*, pages 191–92)

Speaker

The omniscient third-person perspective allows the reader to witness the girl's journey from an external yet empathetic viewpoint. This perspective creates a narrative distance that highlights the girl's sense of isolation, while also suggesting that her story is one that has been experienced by many.

Lines 1–2

The little girl stands on a knife-covered ledge,
Dancing till blood starts to drip from its edge.

The opening image symbolises the girl's vulnerability and the dangers she faces. The ledge – a precarious place to stand – represents a perilous environment, which is heightened by the compound adjective 'knife-covered'. Knives may symbolise emotional wounds, harsh judgements, or painful experiences; 'covered' intensifies the sense of being surrounded by risk and harm, whether physical or psychological.

Dancing is often associated with self-expression and physical release, but here it indicates an involuntary movement and act of survival. Blood represents the negative impact of the girl's environment on her sense of self.

Lines 3–6

She's been licking her wounds since the first time she bled,
Getting judged for each thought she commits in her head.
She's been starving herself since she started to eat,
Connecting the dots of her heart's every beat.

The idiom 'to lick your wounds' means to retreat and recover after defeat. Here, the wound may represent a physical, mental or emotional ordeal. Recovery is presented as an act of self-care, implying that the girl lacks external support. 'Since the first time she bled' is likely a reference to menstruation, which is often treated as something shameful or hidden, much like wounds that must be tended to privately. This line points to broader struggles tied to womanhood, where menstruation becomes a symbol of bodily sacrifice and quiet suffering.

The repetition of 'she's been' mirrors the girl repeatedly 'licking her wounds' and 'starving herself'. While the first action implies an attempt to heal, the second implies an attempt to harm or restrict. This represents her internal conflict as she tries to deal with her trauma, which the poem implies is longstanding.

The girl's thoughts are 'judged' or scrutinised by others, suggesting societal pressures that condemn her. The verb 'commits' implies a sense of guilt or criminality, as if each of the girl's thoughts is somehow a transgression, which adds to the weight of her internal struggle.

'Connecting the dots' means finding the logical relationship between different things or ideas so that they make sense as a whole. By trying to make sense of her heartbeats, the girl is attempting to understand the complexity of her emotions or past experiences. Her overthinking or over-analysis reflects internal conflict and a turbulent emotional state.

Lines 7–8

She's been swimming from fishermen hiding their net,
And running from wolves that deny they're a threat.

Lines 7–8 draws on fairy tale tropes and biblical imagery to emphasise themes of pursuit, deception, and survival. The archetypes of the hunter and the hunted suggest a world in which predation is a naturalised force, and where harm and pursuit are normalised and inevitable.

The wolf is a classic fairy tale predator (Little Red Riding Hood, The Three Little Pigs), often disguising its true intentions to lure in the innocent. The wolves' attempt to lull the girl into a false sense of security reinforces the idea that danger often lurks behind seemingly benign figures. The fishermen evoke biblical disciples, particularly Jesus's followers, who were called to be 'fishers of men' (Matthew 4:19). Rather than a symbol of guidance or salvation, the net suggests entrapment or coercion, subverting the traditional religious imagery.

The contrast between the overtly predatory wolf and the seemingly righteous fishermen highlights a duality of threat – one hunts through aggression, the other through deception. Denial and disguise add a layer of psychological manipulation, creating tension: the girl recognises the danger but faces opposition or disbelief from others. This explains her state of overthinking, which reflects the difficulty of confronting threats that others refuse to acknowledge.

Ongoing movement – shown through the physical acts of running and swimming – represents the girl's continuous battle for survival, which may be emotional, psychological, or physical. Her attempts to avoid entrapment or harm symbolise a longing to maintain freedom or autonomy.

Lines 9–16

And the men chime in, 'Silence girl, don't make a fuss,
I'd never do this, it's not all of us.'
To drown out her sorrow, the male chorus sings,
'It's only a few, you're imagining things.
You're making this issue seem worse than it is;
It was only a comment, a gesture, a kiss.
It was meant as a compliment – please take a joke,
Don't bite the hand groping you, savour each poke.'

Following the references to predatory behaviour and harmful intentions, lines 9–16 represent a male response to such accusations. The men ‘chime in’, an interjection which draws attention to the typically female experience of being interrupted or spoken over in certain social situations.

Persuasive devices, such as imperative commands and repetition, feature throughout this section as the men try to convince the girl that:

- only a small number of men exhibit harmful behaviour;
- the behaviour is not as harmful as the girl perceives it to be;
- their intentions matter more than the impact of their actions, reinforcing the idea that harm is only real if enacted deliberately.

Beginning with the imperative verb ‘Silence’, their interjection indicates their intention to suppress the girl’s feelings and experiences. ‘Don’t make a fuss’ reflects the gendered expectation of women to be compliant and submissive. Dismissing distress as ‘a fuss’ invalidates the girl’s feelings, implying that she is causing unnecessary commotion. Defensive phrases – ‘it’s only a few’ and ‘not all of us’ – are an attempt by the men to minimise the wider culture of misogyny and distance themselves from it.

The collective voice of the men amplifies: they sing in order to ‘drown out’ the girl, a phrase that links back to the earlier reference to swimming. This connects the men, who claim no wrongdoing, to the fishermen with hidden intentions. The ‘chorus’ of male voices implies a rehearsed response and a group effort to collectively silence the girl, suggesting societal complicity.

The men redirect the focus from themselves onto the girl: **‘you’re** imagining things. / **You’re** making this issue seem worse than it is’. Just as **‘it’s only** a few’ men who are the problem, **‘it was only** a comment, a gesture, a kiss’. The repetition of ‘only’ trivialises serious issues of harassment or assault, reinforced by the men’s attempt to reframe harmful behaviour as a ‘compliment’ or a ‘joke’. The dismissive tone of the male chorus mirrors real-world dismissals of women’s discomfort or violation.

The proverbial expression ‘don’t bite the hand that feeds you’ refers to a person’s ungrateful behaviour towards someone who is helping them. By rephrasing the expression, the men enforce the idea that women should be grateful for physical attention, however much unwanted.

Lines 17–24

And the girl learns the axis on which the world spins
Is powered by people who relish their sins.
So, she keeps her head down and she learns how to live,
To be quiet and not take much more than they give.
Cause the fragile knife edge she must constantly walk
Dictates every word she's permitted to talk,
Each mouthful is measured, each glance not too sly,
Lest she melt off her wings just from touching the sky.

Lines 17 and 18 channel the girl's disillusionment. Her understanding of how the world operates is that the people who hold the most power in society are corrupt and feel no remorse for their transgressive behaviour.

The idiom 'keep your head down' means to not cause trouble. Here it represents the tactics that the girl must adopt in order to survive: conform, stay quiet, demand nothing. The repetition of 'learns' in lines 17 and 19 indicates this is learned behaviour and not representative of the girl's inner self.

The metaphor of the 'fragile knife edge' conveys the emotional toll of self-regulation. The personification of the knife edge dictating her words signifies the danger in being too outspoken: challenging the status quo could lead to consequences.

Language of obligation – 'must', 'dictated', 'permitted' – reinforces the girl as being governed by societal expectations. 'Each mouthful' suggests that every action, no matter how small, is scrutinised, with 'measured' connoting control and uniformity.

'Melt off her wings' alludes to Greek mythology and the story of Icarus, whose wings melted when he flew too close to the sun. A cautionary tale about the dangers of ambition, here it represents society's attempt to restrain the girl's freedom and potential.

Lines 25–30

And she'd love to exist as the person she knows

Lives inside of her mind, but her agony grows.
As she slowly but surely resigns herself to
Being smaller and using far less than they do,
Being meeker and not taking up too much space,
Being careful to always remember her place.

Lines 25–26 suggest a dichotomy between the person the girl aspires to be and who society forces her to be. ‘Agony grows’ indicates the emotional toil caused by suppressing her true self.

‘Slowly but surely’ indicates a gradual surrender, while ‘smaller’, ‘meeker’ and ‘careful’ represent the girl’s self-diminishment when forced to conform to gendered expectations. The repetition of ‘being’ mirrors the repetitive, almost ritualistic act of self-constriction.

Lines 31–36

But the little girl vows that the curse will be broken,
She’ll break down the barriers, leave them wide open:
For the daughters of little girls you wouldn’t hear;
For the children of women you silenced with fear;
For our mothers we’ll sing till the screams rip the air;
We are the little girls you couldn’t scare.

Tonally the poem shifts in the final 6 lines, which represent the potential for change. The girl’s vow to break the ‘curse’, a metaphor for the longstanding oppression of women and girls, emphasises her desire to be the positive change she wants to see in the world. The act of breaking down barriers symbolises active rebellion in order to liberate herself and others.

Moving from third-person to collective pronouns positions the speaker alongside the current generation of ‘little girls’ who choose to speak out on behalf of those whose voices have been marginalised in the past. The collective pronouns represent their united strength and refusal to be silenced.

The closing lines are reminiscent of a protest song. The repetition of 'For' followed by collective groups of women acknowledges, honours, and empowers those who have been silenced or ignored. The act of singing (or speaking out) intensifies, representing a determination to amplify the voices of women and girls.

The use of italics emphasises the underlying declaration of strength and resilience. The 'little girls' who were once vulnerable or scared are now fearless, signalling to a generational shift where women will not be intimidated into silence.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What issues in society does 'Little Girls' address?
- How does the title connect to the themes of the poem?
- How would you describe the tone of the poem? Does the tone change?
- Who do you think is the speaker of the poem?
- Listen to a recording of Pennie performing 'Little Girls'. How does reading the poem compare to hearing it performed aloud? Which do you think is more powerful, and why?

Techniques

- What emotions does the poem evoke? How does Pennie achieve this through language and tone?
- How does the rhyme scheme contribute to the emotional impact of the poem?
- What do you think *wolves* and *fishermen hiding their net* symbolise?
- How does Pennie use repetition to enforce key themes or ideas?
- How does the poem illustrate the ways in which women's voices are ignored or dismissed?

Themes

- How does the poem reflect issues of power and inequality?
- What is the significance of the vow to *break down the barriers, leave them wide open*?
- The poem shows how a dismissive term ('little girls') might be taken on by those it was designed to belittle. How does this approach challenge attitudes?
- Do you think the poem has a hopeful or pessimistic view of society? Why?
- What do you think the poet wants the reader to take away from this poem? Do you agree with their message? Why or why not?

Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–8.

By referring to **one** example of language, explain how the poet creates a sense of danger. (2 marks)

Look at lines 9–18.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain what you learn about the character of the men. (4 marks)

Look at lines 19–30.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet makes clear the girl's feelings of restriction. (4 marks)

Look at lines 31–36.

By referring to **one** example of language, explain how the poet creates an effective ending to the poem. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the National 5 Scottish Poetry Collection, show how the poets explore strong feelings. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that Len Pennie's 'Little Girls' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray' (traditional ballad)
- 'The Twa Corbies' (traditional ballad)
- 'A Red, Red Rose' (Robert Burns)
- 'Lochinvar' (Sir Walter Scott)
- 'Auntie' (Nadine Aisha Jassat)

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.

