

# Standing Female Nude



## SUMMARY

The speaker, the nude model of the title, poses for six hours just to earn a little cash. As she positions her body so that her breasts, stomach, and butt catch the light coming through the window, a man paints a dull image of her. He tells her to twist more to the right and not to squirm. She knows she'll be depicted in a cold, precise manner and put on display in some prestigious gallery. The middle class will murmur admiringly at this picture of an impoverished sex worker who works by the river, deeming it capital-A Art.

Well, that might happen. The painter fusses over the structure of the piece while she wonders when she'll be able to eat again. He tells her she's getting too skinny, which is a bad thing. Her breasts have started to sag and it's chilly in the painter's studio. She foresees the Queen of England staring at her body, muttering her approval and then carrying on as usual. The thought of the Queen looking at the painting makes the speaker laugh.

The painter is named Georges and he claims to be a genius. Yet he doesn't always pay close attention to what he's doing, and sometimes he gets an erection while staring at the speaker's body. Men think about their mothers in order to stop such things. The painter controls the speaker's body on the canvas, suggestively dabbing his paintbrush into the paint again and again. The speaker pities small men like him, who have no money for her services. He's as poor as she is; they are both just trying to get by.

She asks him why he paints her, and he replies that there are no other options. He tells her not to speak. Her happiness is strange to him; artists like him are much too serious. In the evenings, the speaker goes to the bars to drink wine and dance. He finishes the painting and, quite satisfied with it, shows it to her before lighting a cigarette. She simply asks for her payment and gathers up her clothes. She doesn't see herself in the painting at all.

his model. Both are, in essence, profiting off a naked female form, but the male artist is deemed a "genius" while the model is written off as nothing but a "river-whore."

When the speaker asks the artist why he does "this," he responds "Because / I have to." It's not clear if this need stems from a desire to prove himself, to make a living, or, likely, both. What is clear is that he takes himself and his work extremely "seriously." He snaps orders at the speaker, tells her "he's a genius," and proudly displays his painting as though she should be honored and awed. He also gets an erection while painting, emphasizing that his work is no less erotic than the speaker's own. And yet, the rest of society seems to support his ego: his art will be "hung / in great museums" and praised by the "bourgeoisie." The speaker even imagines the "Queen of England" approvingly "gazing on [her] shape"—not appreciating the female model herself but rather the skill of the male artist who "possess[ed]" her "on canvas." He may not have enough money to pay outright for this woman's sexual "arts," then, but he can certainly profit off them reputationally in a way that she cannot.

Indeed, the speaker earns pittance for her time and can barely afford to eat. That "Because / I have to" applies to the speaker's work as much as it does the artist's; she's "getting thin," aging, and unsure when her next meal is coming. The male artist's brushstrokes will make her naked body acceptable to society's upper crust, while that body itself must slink off into the darkness and "dance around bars" to earn a living. Artists like him may "take themselves too seriously," but it seems that no one takes the female speaker seriously at all.

This hypocrisy is perhaps meant to evoke life as a female writer in a male-dominated literary scene. That is, the model might [symbolize](#) the poet herself: a woman who bares her soul in her writing, yet whose work and experiences may be commandeered or dismissed by self-serious male writers and critics.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28



## THEMES



### GENDER, WORK, AND DOUBLE STANDARDS

"Standing Female Nude" depicts the double standards in the way society values men's and women's work. The poem's speaker is a poor sex worker posing nude for a respected male artist (loosely based on the French Cubist painter Georges Braque), who is implied to be just as poor as



### OBJECTIFICATION AND THE MALE GAZE

The story presented in "Standing Female Nude" illustrates the way that women have been historically objectified, misrepresented, and erased by the male gaze. Even as the male artist here aims to "possess[]" his female model "on canvas," he doesn't "capture" her likeness so much as create an image of a person who doesn't exist. The woman herself is rendered invisible by this portrait, which obscures her reality

and even her humanity itself.

The speaker makes it clear that the man painting her, despite being a so-called "genius," sees her as an object rather than an actual person standing in front of him. He "drains the colour" from her, trying to "analytically" capture her physical "shape" rather than showcase her spirit, personality, and the very real life she lives.

That he "stiffens for [her] warmth" suggests that he's turned on as he paints her, implying that he more specifically views her as, and is shaping her into, a *sexual* object. Indeed, he wants her to stand "still" with "Belly nipple arse in the window light." He isn't thinking about her comfort or dignity, only what looks best to him—and, perhaps, what will attract viewers. As such, he's disappointed that she's thin and that her breasts are sagging not because she's starving, but because it doesn't look good in the painting. To him, she's a mere surface, something beautiful to be rendered on canvas for others to consume. When she tries to engage with him, he tells her not to talk. "He is concerned with volume, space"; her hunger, suffering, and voice don't matter.

The model is the speaker in the poem, of course, which grants her the voice that the male artist would silence. She looks down on the painter as a "[l]ittle man," "confuses" him with her "smile," and dismisses his portrait of her. "It does not look like me," she says, suggesting that doesn't accept the fantasy of her that he's so "proud" of. *She* knows who she is, even if *he* doesn't. The speaker also laughs at the idea of aristocrats "coo[ing] / at such an image of a river-whore," as their "murmurs" belie their lack of understanding of the reality of her life. Still, people in "museums" will ultimately appreciate and remember the man's painting, not the woman behind it. The male gaze ignores the reality of women's lives, flattening them into mere "shape[s]" to be stared at.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-14
- Lines 16-19
- Lines 24-28



### CLASS, HYPOCRISY, AND ARTISTIC SNOBBERY

The speaker of "Standing Female Nude" envisions the painting of her naked body being "hung / in great museums," where the "bourgeoisie"—and perhaps even the Queen of England herself!—will softly, seriously murmur their approval. This [ironic](#) image of the wealthy quietly ogling a painting "of a river-whore" with whom they'd never interact in real life makes the speaker laugh. The poem implies that the upper classes like to think of themselves as highbrow tastemakers when, in reality, their appreciation of art is shallow and conformist.

Members of the bourgeoisie praise the speaker's portrait because they think they're supposed to, not because they have any sort of real emotional connection with the work. "They call it Art," the speaker says, that capital A conveying the speaker's mocking disdain and hinting that in her mind, such "Art" is superficial and inauthentic.

Indeed, the speaker knows that were she actually to meet any of these people by the riverbanks where she sells sex, they'd turn up their noses and hurry on past. Her hunger and desperation wouldn't matter to them, and they only approve of her now that her body has been sapped of its vitality ("drain[ed]" of "colour") and "hung / in great museums." They're classist hypocrites who prioritize a painting over a person—and who think this makes them smart and cultured.

In reality, their approval is meaningless to the speaker. To someone worried about "the next meal," overly serious conversations about "volume" and "space" seem not simply out of touch but downright ridiculous. In undermining the authority of these artistic judges, the poem undermines the concept of capital-A "Art" in general. Why should these people, the poem implicitly asks, get to decide what counts as art in the first place—and why should art matter more than the human stories behind it?

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-9
- Lines 11-15
- Lines 24-25



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*Six hours like ...  
... to be still.*

"Standing Female Nude" is a dramatic monologue told from the point of view of a female sex worker who's modeling for a male artist. Its 28 lines of [free verse](#) are broken into four septets (seven-line stanzas), and the overall appearance of the poem is straightforward, much like its down-to-earth, working-class speaker.

The poem begins with the speaker describing her pose: she stands for "Six hours like this," her "Belly nipple arse in the window light." Right away, the poem emphasizes the speaker's naked body; she's exposing herself, making herself vulnerable, for a "few francs." The [alliteration](#) here ("for a few francs") calls readers' attention to how little she'll earn for "six hours" of work. This, in turn, suggests that this woman is poor and doesn't have a lot of choices. This phrase also implies that the poem takes place in France (a *franc* is a French unit of currency prior to the introduction of the Euro).

Though her body is bathed in light from the window, the speaker says that the artist she's posing for (introduced as an anonymous "he" in these lines) "drains the colour" from her.

- This [alludes](#) to the fact that early Cubist works were typically painted in very muted colors. Though readers don't know it yet, the painter here is the famous French Cubist artist Georges Braque; the [painting](#) that inspired this poem features a mixture of dull gray, brownish red, and yellow tones.
- [Metaphorically](#), however, this line about draining color suggests that the painter is not really seeing the speaker for who she is. His rendering of her body is cold and lifeless, and it fails to capture her vitality.

This artist tells the speaker to move "Further to the right" and then instructs her "to be still." He's fully absorbed in his painting and needs her to look a certain way regardless of whether it's comfortable for her. In short: he's much more interested in his *painting* than the woman behind it.

### LINES 5-7

*I shall be ...  
... call it Art.*

The speaker says, "I shall be represented analytically." This suggests that the artist uses cold logic to scrutinize her body and recreate her on canvas. Rather than work from a place of intuition, emotion, and so on, he will study her component parts—her "Belly nipples arse," etc.

- This is another [allusion](#) to Cubism. Some early Cubism was called "Analytical Cubism," in fact; artists would break their subjects up into pieces and then reassemble them, creating art marked by a fragmented appearance and surreal perspectives.

When the artist is done, the speaker imagines that her portrait will be "hung / in great museums," where the "bourgeoisie" will stop to admiringly "coo / at such an image of a river-whore." *Bourgeoisie* refers to the moneyed middle class—a group with conformist, materialistic values that gets to decide what is capital-A "Art."

The words "bourgeoisie" and "river-whore" highlight the contrast between this woman's station and that of the people who can afford to spend their time wandering about "in great museums." The image is [ironic](#): these people will stand admiring a picture of a woman they almost certainly couldn't be bothered to care about in real life. They'd likely be repulsed by the way she earns a living and fail to see the callousness in the fact that they privilege a *painting* above the human being who inspired it.

Although the speaker and the artist are actually collaborating

to create this "Art" (the artist needs her to pose for long hours for him to paint her), only *his* skill will be recognized and rewarded. The speaker's image may grace the halls of prestigious galleries, but this will do nothing to change her own life or situation.

### LINES 8-11

*Maybe. He is ...  
... the studio is cold.*

In the second stanza, the speaker expresses doubt that the artist's work will actually receive (or be worthy of) all that attention. "Maybe," she says; *maybe* people will call the painting "Art," or maybe they won't.

Really, she doesn't care all that much. While the painter is "concerned with volume, space," she's got more urgent things on her mind: where her "next meal" will come from. She isn't posing nude because she has nothing better to do; she needs the money. (The mention of volume and space is also another direct [allusion](#) to Cubist painter Georges Braque, who once said, "beauty [...] appears to me in terms of volume of line, of mass, of weight [...].")

Her hunger is taking a clear physical toll: the artist comments on her body, telling her that she's "getting thin" and that "this is not good." Her thinness bothers him not because he's worried about her well-being, however, but because he wants her to look her best for his painting. Again, his *art* takes precedence over her *humanity*.

The speaker adds that her "breasts hang / slightly low," which may be further evidence of her hunger and/or her age. The painter's workspace is also "cold," suggesting how little thought the artist has put into what this experience must be like for his model. She has to stand there naked for hours, and he can't be bothered to make sure she's warm, fed, and comfortable.

Note the use of [asyndeton](#) in lines 8 and 11:

Maybe. He is concerned with **volume, space.**  
[...] My breasts hang  
slightly **low, the studio is cold.**

The lack of coordinating conjunctions speeds up the poem and evokes the speaker's casual, almost dismissive [tone](#). Abstract ideas about art aren't all that interesting, the poem implies, when you're uncomfortable and starving.

### LINES 11-15

*In the tealeaves ...  
... he's a genius.*

The speaker imagines looking into the future ([metaphorically](#), reading "the tealeaves"), where she can see "the Queen of England gazing / on [her] shape" in some museum. The humming [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in lines 13-14 evoke the

quiet sounds of approval made by the Queen as she looks at the speaker's body:

on my shape. Magnificent, she murmurs  
moving on. It makes me laugh. [...]

The Queen certainly wouldn't call the speaker's body, rendered in the painting as a cold "shape," "magnificent" in person. She would never interact with the speaker in person at all, in fact; their worlds are entirely separate.

The speaker laughs at the absurdity of the situation and the apparent lack of self-awareness of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy: shallow, self-important people who fail to recognize the hypocrisy of finding a painting of a "river-whore" acceptable but not the woman herself. There's uncomfortable dissonance between the fact that the speaker is so poor that she has to model naked to earn a meal and the fact that her portrait will be viewed by the poshest members of society.

The speaker goes on to say that the artist's name is "Georges." This [alludes](#) to the famous French Cubist painter Georges Braque, whose painting "Le Grand Nu" (or "Large Nude") inspired this poem. George tells the speaker that "he's a genius." He's likely confident in his abilities in part because there's a long lineage of men before him who have done exactly what he hopes to do: make it into halls of great museums.

The speaker doesn't necessarily believe him, however. She says he "tells me he's a genius," not, "he's a genius." Indeed, the speaker doesn't seem to think too highly of George's work. She's already noted that he "drains the colour" from her and represents her "analytically." In the speaker's mind, there's no honesty, passion, or humanity in this artist's work. His painting obscures the woman herself.

These lines contain frequent [caesura](#) and [parataxis](#), which, together, create a choppy rhythm and at times jarring transitions ("It makes me laugh. His name / is Georges."). The speaker comes across as straightforward, no-nonsense; she doesn't have patience for the artist's delusions of grandeur or the bourgeoisie's shallow appreciation of art.

### LINES 16-21

*There are times ...  
... how we can.*

These lines continue to undermine the notion that this artist is actually a "genius." He might take himself and his art quite seriously, but the observant speaker notes that he doesn't always "concentrate" on his work. Indeed, at times he gets distracted by her body and "stiffens" (or gets an erection) while thinking of her "warmth."

The speaker humorously follows this up with, "Men think of their mothers"—a nod to the trope that men think about something decidedly unsexy in order to avoid getting turned on

at inconvenient moments. The implication is that "George," despite being a celebrated artist, is still a man like any other whom the speaker has encountered in her line of work.

The artist doesn't seem to be thinking about how miserable his model must be standing there hungry and naked in the cold. Instead, he's turned on by her body and, it seems, by the sense of his own mastery. The sexually suggestive [imagery](#) of him "dip[ping] the brush / repeatedly into the paint" further reflects his lust. The speaker adds that he "possesses" her body "on canvas"; he controls her body by painting it as he sees fit. The poem hints that rather than representing the *real* her—the hungry, tired, impoverished woman in front of him—he's depicting the speaker as he *wants* to see her.

The speaker pities George, puncturing his ego by viewing him as a "Little man" with an inflated ego who can't afford her "arts." She isn't the only one who is "poor," it turns out, and both she and the painter are simply doing what they "can" to make ends meet. The difference is that society respects George's work while looking down on the speaker's. Both George and society's upper crust see his paintings as impressive, high-class "Art" while finding the speaker's line of work distasteful, yet, in reality, there's really not much separating her "arts" from the painter's: both are selling a woman's naked body—and at least the speaker is honest about the eroticism of her work.

### LINES 22-26

*I ask him ...  
... around the bars.*

The speaker asks the artist why he paints. He responds, "Because / I have to. There's no choice." He's poor, and he thus leans on his artistic skills to make money. (He also might have "no choice" in the sense that he feels compelled to paint.) His lack of choice mirrors the speaker's own; that "Because I have to" applies just as much to *her* profession as it does to his.

Yet rather than acknowledge their shared struggle and view their work together as a *collaboration*, the artist continues to treat the speaker with condescension. He tells her not to talk and then is "confuse[d]" by her "smile." The speaker's smile suggests she's getting a kick out of watching him squirm. He likely expects her to be embarrassed and deferential in the face of his supposed "genius," but, in her mind, he's not as important as he thinks he is. She says artists such as him "take themselves too seriously," implying that George needs to lighten up.

Again, the poem features [parataxis](#)—generally short, clipped sentences that might be rearranged and still make sense. For example:

[...] There's no choice. Don't talk.  
My smile confuses him. These artists  
take themselves too seriously.

Here, parataxis helps to convey how little the artist wants to engage with the speaker; he quickly shuts her questions down. It also allows for stark [juxtaposition](#), as the speaker follows up this point about artists' seriousness with her own nightly routine: she goes to the pubs and drinks wine and "dance[s] around" merrily. This is where she finds men to pay for her services. The phrase "I fill myself with wine" might hint that she's numbing some of the pain of her existence—that she is *unfulfilled*, yet she accepts that she must do what she can and find joy however she can. Her life is hard, but it's also her own. She's not trying to impress distant museum-goers in order to change her fortune. In some ways, she's freer than this miserable artist who is so beholden to good taste, to what others have decided is "Art."

### LINES 26-28

*When it's finished ...  
... look like me.*

When the artist is done painting, he "proudly" shows the speaker the finished product and then "lights a cigarette." Clearly, he's satisfied with his work, kicking back in a way that suggests he's just completed a strenuous, impressive effort. The speaker doesn't applaud his work or murmur approvingly like the people who will stare at it in museums, however. Instead, she simply asks for the "Twelve francs" she's owed and gathers her clothes.

[Asyndeton](#) ("proudly, lights a cigarette") continues to make the poem sound straightforward and even curt, emphasizing that this man has used the speaker in much the way her other clients do. She's also unimpressed because the painting "does not look like [her]." This suggests that the man's supposedly careful observations of her body have done him no good. In treating her like an object—a "shape" to be "represented analytically"—he has failed to capture her essence or humanity. He hasn't cast a light on her or her situation or captured her unique spirit; he has only contributed to her erasure. His work couldn't have existed without hers, yet she won't get any respect for the part she has played.

and/or fails to grant her work the respect it deserves. The model's pointed remark that "These artists / take themselves too seriously" likely applies to Duffy's male contemporaries (and the long line of male predecessors) who believed poetry was men's province, while women were only fit to play the part of the muse.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Six hours like this for a few francs. / Belly nipple arse in the window light, / he drains the colour from me."
- **Lines 5-6:** "I shall be represented analytically and hung / in great museums."
- **Lines 10-13:** "My breasts hang / slightly low, the studio is cold. In the tealeaves / I can see the Queen of England gazing / on my shape."
- **Lines 18-21:** "He possesses me on canvas as he dips the brush / repeatedly into the paint. Little man, / you've not the money for the arts I sell. / Both poor, we make our living how we can."
- **Lines 25-26:** "At night I fill myself / with wine and dance around the bars."
- **Lines 27-28:** "I say / Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me."



### THE PAINTBRUSH

In the third stanza, the speaker describes the "genius" painter getting aroused while looking at her naked body and then dipping his "brush / repeatedly into the paint." This image is deliberately sexual: the paintbrush is a phallic [symbol](#). This action of repeatedly shoving it into the paint reflects the painter's desire to "possess[]" the speaker—despite not having "the money for the arts" she sells. He can't afford to pay her for sex, so he "has" her in the only way he can—by painting her. He isn't thinking of her as a person who is only here because she needs money to eat; he's thinking of her as an object, something that exists merely to titillate the senses.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** "He possesses me on canvas as he dips the brush / repeatedly into the paint."



## SYMBOLS



### THE NUDE MODEL

The nude model in the poem might [symbolize](#) the poet herself or any female author/artist creating in a patriarchal society. Carol Ann Duffy began writing at a time when the literary world was dominated by male voices. (Indeed, in the 300+ year history of the United Kingdom's poet laureateship, Duffy was the first woman to be awarded the title in 2009!) The model's nakedness suggests the ways in which the poet makes herself vulnerable in her work, exposing her mind and soul to an audience that often reduces her to gender



## POETIC DEVICES

### JUXTAPOSITION

"Standing Female Nude" features stark [juxtapositions](#) throughout that undermine the "genius" of the male artist and highlight the callousness and hypocrisy of the "bourgeoisie."

For example, the speaker says in the second stanza that the artist "is concerned with volume, space. / I with the next meal." These drastically different priorities highlight how different the lives of these two people are. Despite the fact that they are "Both poor," only one of them is worried about getting enough to eat. The painter's artistic concerns seem frivolous and trivial alongside the speaker's hunger, and readers can understand why the speaker ultimately declares that "These artists / take themselves too seriously."

Later, the speaker follows up the artist's declaration that "he's a genius" with the reality that "There are times he does not concentrate / and stiffens for my warmth." She's skewering his inflated sense of self-importance, contrasting the idea of his artistic genius with his basic, human lust. He thinks he's above the reality of being a fallible human being, the poem implies, but he's not.

The poem also juxtaposes his seriousness against the speaker's relaxed demeanor. The painter demands that she be "still" and stop trying to talk to him. She smiles, which "confuses him," and laughs at the thought of the "Queen of England" looking at her portrait. Through juxtaposition, the speaker comes across as much more self-aware and honest than both the painter and the class of people celebrating his work. She knows that society doesn't respect her "arts," and she has no chance of being deemed a "genius" by the elite. The speaker definitely *doesn't* take herself too seriously, nor does she think that all this capital-A "Art" business really matters as much as people like to think it does.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "The bourgeoisie will coo / at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art."
- **Lines 8-9:** "He is concerned with volume, space. / I with the next meal."
- **Lines 12-14:** "I can see the Queen of England gazing / on my shape. Magnificent, she murmurs, / moving on. It makes me laugh."
- **Lines 15-17:** "He tells me he's a genius. / There are times he does not concentrate / and stiffens for my warmth."
- **Lines 24-28:** "My smile confuses him. These artists / take themselves too seriously. At night I fill myself / with wine and dance around the bars. When it's finished / he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette. I say / Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me."

## ENJAMBMENT

"Standing Female Nude" is filled with [enjambment](#) that adds to its casual, conversational tone. The model of the title uses naturalistic language that frequently spills across the poem's line breaks. For example:

I shall be represented analytically and hung

in great museums. [...]

The male painter "is concerned with volume, space," but the female speaker has bigger things on her mind—like her next meal. Fittingly, then, the poet allows her language to flow smoothly down the page rather than force it into a stiff pattern and coincide with regular line breaks.

At times, the poem's use of enjambment feels quite pointed and evocative. In the previous example, it allows the word "hung" to itself "hang" threateningly in white space. The speaker is talking about her *portrait*, not her actual *body*, but enjambment creates an unsettling moment of anticipation; it sounds, briefly, like the speaker *herself* will be "hung." This makes the image of the "bourgeoisie" approvingly "coo[ing]" at her portrait in the next line sound all the more cold and inhumane.

In the poem's final stanza, enjambments speed the poem up. The "six hours" are up, and the poem's quickened pace hints that the speaker is eager to get out of the "cold" artist's studio.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "hung / in"
- **Lines 6-7:** "coo / at"
- **Lines 10-11:** "hang / slightly"
- **Lines 11-12:** "tealeaves / I"
- **Lines 12-13:** "gazing / on"
- **Lines 14-15:** "name / is"
- **Lines 16-17:** "concentrate / and"
- **Lines 18-19:** "brush / repeatedly"
- **Lines 22-23:** "Because / I"
- **Lines 24-25:** "artists / take"
- **Lines 25-26:** "myself / with"
- **Lines 26-27:** "finished / he"
- **Lines 27-28:** "say / Twelve"

## PARATAXIS

The poem resists overly flowery language and often bounces abruptly from one thought to the next, creating [parataxis](#). The short, clipped sentences and frequent [caesura](#) result in a choppy rhythm and convey the sense that this speaker is utterly to-the-point and matter-of-fact. For example, note the parataxis (and [asyndeton](#)) of lines 10-11

[...] My breasts hang  
slightly low, the studio is cold. [...]

Parataxis makes it seem as though the reader is listening to the speaker talk in real time. Hungry and cold, it sounds like she's eager to get this ordeal over with so she can go home.

There's more parataxis in lines 14-15:

[...] His name

is Georges. He tells me he's a genius.

The speaker sounds curt and abrupt. Readers get the sense that the speaker isn't all that impressed with this "George," and that she certainly doesn't think that "he's a genius."

Finally, the choppy language in the poem's final stanza conveys the coldness between the speaker and artist. There's no warmth in this partnership. Instead, the artist gives clipped responses and icy commands to the speaker: "There's no choice. Don't talk." The speaker, for her part, is equally abrupt: "I say / Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me." The bourgeoisie might think her portrait is high "Art," but she's certainly not romanticizing this transaction.

#### Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "My breasts hang / slightly low, the studio is cold."
- **Lines 14-15:** "It makes me laugh. His name / is Georges. He tells me he's a genius."
- **Lines 23-25:** "There's no choice. Don't talk. / My smile confuses him. These artists / take themselves too seriously."
- **Lines 27-28:** "I say / Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me."

## ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) works much like (and sometimes overlaps with) [parataxis](#) in the poem. The speaker comes across as no-nonsense and to-the-point, not one to get lost in flowery or grandiose language. In line 2, for example, the speaker's asyndeton swiftly undermines the sense that there's anything romantic or highbrow about this portrait session:

Belly nipple arse in the window light,

Asyndeton reduces her body to a series of parts, jammed swiftly together. This peek behind the curtain of the artistic process makes the whole thing seem rather cold and vulgar.

Elsewhere, asyndeton adds to the poem's casual, conversational tone. In line 8, the speaker says, "He is concerned with **volume, space**." Had the speaker said, "He is concerned with volume **and** space," the line wouldn't come across as so nonchalant. As it is, the speaker sounds like she's quickly dismissing the artist's concerns. This makes sense: "volume" and "space" must seem pretty abstract and unimportant in comparison to her own anxieties regarding when she will eat again.

There's more asyndeton in line 27:

he shows me **proudly, lights** a cigarette.

The absence of a coordinating conjunction again makes the poem move more quickly and conveys the speaker's casual, dismissive tone. She's not impressed with his painting; she just wants to get her money and clothes and go.

#### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Belly nipple arse"
- **Line 8:** "He is concerned with volume, space"
- **Lines 10-11:** "My breasts hang / slightly low, the studio is cold"
- **Line 27:** "he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette"

## IRONY

There are a few levels of [irony](#) in "Standing Female Nude." For one thing, there's the fact that the "bourgeoisie will coo / at such an image of a river-whore"; a poor sex worker—a person who perhaps would never be allowed to step foot in one of these museums—is now a star attraction. In everyday life, a vast social gulf would separate the speaker from society's upper crust; the bourgeoisie would scoff at the speaker were they to encounter her in the streets, but they love looking at her "shape" now that it's on display "in great museums." The "Queen of England" herself would deem the speaker's body "Magnificent." The upper classes think of themselves as serious, cultured judges of high Art, but the speaker—and readers—get the distinct sense that they're deluded hypocrites who don't understand art at all.

Indeed, the portrait is drab and lifeless, an "analytical[]" rather than an emotional or passionate representation of the speaker. The male artist calls himself a "genius," but the poem gives no indication that this is actually true. His preoccupation "with volume, space" and his need to "possess[]" the speaker result in a lifeless portrait—one the speaker can't even recognize herself in. When he shows her the finished product, she says, "It does not look like me." Despite his commands and painstaking work, the artist fails to capture his model's essence. In painting her portrait, he ironically erases the woman herself.

#### Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-7
- Lines 11-14
- Lines 15-21
- Lines 26-28



## VOCABULARY

**Francs** (Line 1) - A unit of French currency. The implication is that the speaker isn't get paid much for her work.

**Arse** (Line 2) - British slang for a person's butt.

**Madam** (Lines 3-4) - A polite term for addressing a woman. The word "mademoiselle" refers to an unmarried woman or girl; the fact that the artist calls the speaker "madam," combined with her later reference to sagging breasts, imply that she is no longer young.

**Analytically** (Line 5) - This means each part will be studied and then rendered in careful detail. The word implies that the artist is a calculating, methodical painter rather than a passionate, emotional one.

**Bourgeoisie** (Line 6) - The middle class. The term is dismissive, often referring more specifically to a class of people with money to burn and who are materialistic, shallow, and conformist.

**Coo** (Line 6) - Murmur softly. The stuffy museum-goers will quietly, delicately praise the painting.

**Tealeaves** (Lines 11-12) - This refers to the practice of tea leaf divination: telling fortunes by interpreting the patterns of leftover leaves in a cup of tea.

**Georges** (Lines 14-15) - Likely an [allusion](#) to Georges Braque, a French cubist painter, suggesting the poem was inspired by his 1908 painting "Big Nude."

**Stiffens** (Line 17) - The speaker is describing the painter getting an erection.

**Possesses** (Line 18) - Owns or takes control of.

**Shawl** (Lines 27-28) - A garment used for covering the head and shoulders.

artists [who] / take themselves too seriously."

## RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Standing Female Nude" doesn't follow a [rhyme scheme](#). As with the lack of [meter](#), the absence of a rhyme scheme makes the poem sound more down-to-earth and conversational. This is a woman who spends most of her time working, trying to scrape together a living; a steady rhyme scheme would make the poem sound more artfully constructed and false—like it takes itself "too seriously."



## SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is a female sex worker doing some nude modeling "for a few francs." Her body is growing "thin" from hunger, and she worries about how she'll be able to afford her next meal. She refers to herself as a "river-whore," suggesting that she mainly sells sex to sailors and fishermen—other working-class people like herself.

As she stands naked in front of a supposedly "genius" male artist (implied to be French Cubist artist Georges Braque), she imagines the crowds of affluent people who will praise the painter's image of her—even though those same people presumably couldn't be bothered with the real woman whose "arts" they would no doubt find repulsive. The speaker comes across as sharp and observant, able to see through "bourgeoisie" hypocrisy and undermining the authority of those who decide what gets to be called "Art."

She also sees through the inflated sense of self-importance displayed by this artist and others like him, who "take themselves too seriously." There are more important things to her than "volume, space"—like finding "the next meal." Her "smile confuses" the painter, who likely expects a poor sex worker to be diffident before a male "genius." Instead, she's aware that both she and the painter simply "make our living how we can" and isn't cowed by his supposed greatness.

She also thinks he's failed to capture her likeness in his painting, which has "drain[ed]" her of color. But she doesn't seem to let the painter's misunderstanding of her define her; the painting may look nothing like her, but she's more concerned with taking her payment and getting out of there. Unlike the artist, she has no illusions of moving up in the world. She's just trying to make it from one day to the next.



## SETTING

The poem is set inside a male artist's "studio." It's fair to assume that this studio is in France sometime in the early 1900s, given that the artist is based on the French cubist painter Georges Braque. The speaker, a sex worker, is posing nude near a window. She notes that the studio is "cold" and she seems



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Standing Female Nude" is a 28-line [free verse](#) poem split into four septets (seven-line stanzas). Though the poem has no regular [meter](#) or [rhyme](#), its arrangement into four even blocks of text might suggest the way the painter coldly divides the woman's body into parts ("Belly nipples arse") to be rendered "analytically." The poem's short sentences and frequent [caesura](#) create a choppy rhythm that keeps the poem feeling very clipped and matter-of-fact. This emphasizes the speaker's working-class sensibilities; she's more concerned with her "next meal" than making the poem adhere to a specific format.

### METER

"Standing Female Nude" is written in [free verse](#), so it doesn't follow a set [meter](#). The lack of meter results in a more natural, conversational poem; the speaker sounds as if she's casually telling someone else about her experience modeling for this painter. The more down-to-earth, organic rhythms created by free verse also more accurately reflect the speech of a working-class character: she doesn't consider herself one of "These



physically uncomfortable as the artist tells her to twist her body in certain ways and then hold still so that he can paint her. This stiff, joyless environment reflects the fact that the male artist takes himself "too seriously," at least in the speaker's mind. She's eager to get out of there once the work is done.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is among the most acclaimed and high-profile poets in the contemporary UK. Born in Scotland in 1955, she became the UK's first female poet laureate in 2009 and served in the position for the next 10 years.

Duffy's first poetry collection, *Standing Female Nude*, was published in 1985. In addition to this poem, it featured many of the poems that would launch Duffy into the public eye: "[Head of English](#)," "[Education for Leisure](#)," "[War Photographer](#)," and "[The Dolphins](#)," among others. Like many of her poems, "Standing Female Nude" is written as a [dramatic monologue](#): a poem told from the perspective of someone who is clearly not the poet. Duffy has often used this form to elevate the voices of people pushed to the margins of society. In "Standing Female Nude," she focuses on the experience of a female sex worker whose "arts" are devalued in comparison to the "serious[]" efforts of the male artist painting her.

Duffy was also deeply influenced by [Sylvia Plath](#), whose *Collected Works* she received for her 25th birthday. She would go on to edit an edition of Plath's poems and to write [a piece for The Guardian](#) about how Plath's work, with its revolutionary interest in women's internal lives, blazed a trail Duffy would follow in her own poetry.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Standing Female Nude" was inspired by real-life art: "Le Grand Nu," or "Large Nude," by the French painter Georges Braque. Alongside Pablo Picasso, Braque pioneered the avant-garde visual art style known as Cubism.

Put simply, Cubist artists would play with perspective by breaking their subjects up into parts or geometric shapes and then reassembling them. The poem nods to Cubism's techniques by pointing out the artist's obsession with "volume, space" and desire to represent the speaker's body "analytically." Indeed, Braque himself said that "beauty [...] appears to me in terms of volume, of line, of mass, of weight [...]." Though ultimately one of the most celebrated artists of the 20th century, one 1908 critic skewered Braque's work as "reducing everything, places and figures and houses, to geometric schemas, to cubes."

Duffy's own poetic career took off during the age of Margaret Thatcher, whose long tenure as Prime Minister of the UK was marked by class struggle, poverty, and the dismantling of post-

war welfare institutions. Thatcher rose to power in the aftermath of the turbulent 1970s, and her libertarian economics and conservative social policies (as well as her prominent role as the first woman Prime Minister of the UK) made her a divisive and much-reviled figure. Many working-class people took a particular dislike to Thatcher for her union-busting and her failure to support impoverished families in industrial fields like coal mining.

Perhaps in response to a growing social conservatism, the '70s and '80s in England were also marked by a rise in feminist consciousness. Books like Susan Faludi's *Backlash* examined the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which society was reacting against the women's movement, and [third-wave feminism](#), focused on identity and political power, began to emerge out of the [second-wave feminism](#) of the '60s.

Duffy's work, with its interest in women's inner lives and areas of female experience often neglected by the literary world, reflects the tumultuous political world in which she came of age.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Duffy's Illustrious Career](#) — A Poetry Foundation biography of the UK's first woman and LGBTQ poet laureate. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- ["Le Grand Nu"](#) — View the Cubist painting that inspired Duffy's poem. (<https://www.wikiart.org/en/georges-braque/big-nude-1908>)
- [Georges Braque](#) — Read about the French Cubist painter on whom this poem's "George" is loosely based. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Georges-Braque>)
- [A Night with Figure Drawing Models](#) — Watch this video in which figure drawing models and students discuss their experiences of creating art together. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7oaHOf18Oc>)

### 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](#)
- [Elvis's Twin Sister](#)
- [Eurydice](#)
- [Foreign](#)
- [Head of English](#)

- [In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)
- [In Your Mind](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Mean Time](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- [Mrs Aesop](#)
- [Mrs Darwin](#)
- [Mrs Faust](#)
- [Mrs Lazarus](#)
- [Mrs Midas](#)
- [Mrs Sisyphus](#)
- [Originally](#)
- [Penelope](#)
- [Pilate's Wife](#)
- [Prayer](#)
- [Quickdraw](#)
- [Recognition](#)
- [Stealing](#)
- [The Darling Letters](#)
- [The Dolphins](#)

- [The Good Teachers](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)
- [War Photographer](#)
- [We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)
- [Work](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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