

# Gwen harwood essay

Finance, Investment



Gwen Harwood's poetry presents an educated, experienced and multi-faceted exploration of human experience and suffering, one so powerful it transcends societal constraints and resonates with any reader regardless of race, age, wealth or social status. It is for these reasons that Harwood's label as a 'Tassie housewife poet' is an unfair and restricting view of Harwood's poetry.

Harwood's poems 'The Sharpness of Death' and 'Triste, Triste' are enriched with broad academic knowledge and deep contemplation of time - two things which certainly reach beyond the bounds of a simple 'Tassie housewife'. 'The Sharpness of Death' is a four-part contemplation of death and its various effects on the humanity of people- one part of which draws on her broad academic knowledge on philosophy's attempt to form an understanding of death. Harwood titles the second section of the poem 'Heidegger', a reference to famous German philosopher Martin Heidegger who was well known for his existential and phenomenological explorations of the infamous 'question of being'- which is referenced directly in this section by Harwood in the lines 'the human concept of Being/ and the question "What is Being?" are essential: since man's a language user he must say things are, or cannot speak at all'.

She also refers to Wittgenstein, meaning Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein, an Austrian-British philosopher who worked primarily in logic in the line 'Like Wittgenstein, he found much cause to wonder/ "that there are things in being". Philosophy is renowned for being a deeply insightful and complex subject, and Harwood's perpetual and effective references to these great philosophers prove her to be a well-educated and contemplative woman-

proving Harwood steps far outside of the stereotype placed upon her as this description of a highly academic and learned woman is the polar opposite to what a 'Tassie housewife' is considered to be. On top of her broad and effectively used knowledge on philosophy, not only is she fluent in the research and knowledge of the aforementioned philosophers, but views their work critically- proving her academic capabilities even further. Harwood discusses Heidegger's descent into doubt and hopelessness toward the end of his career and criticises him for the melancholic view he acquired. In the closing lines of the section, 'Death, he said, was "the ultimate situation". / I hope he found some light/ beyond that field of black everlasting flowers', Harwood criticises Heidegger for romanticising death and morphing it into a saccharine, idyllic paradise ('field of black everlasting flowers') through losing himself in his work and forgetting to enjoy other aspects of his life, therefore depriving himself of his humanity and sucking every inch of sweetness and light in his life, thus allowing himself to take comfort in the certainty and finality of death.

As Harwood is frequently viewing death as the villain in her poems, this sugar-coated view of death is something she opposes. Harwood also draws on her knowledge of Ancient Greece through the line 'black everlasting flowers' which refers to the Ancient Greek's 'Elysian Fields', their concept of life after death, and the reference to the 'Grecian world' in the line 'Heidegger left ontology for Holderlin/ and his blessed Grecian world,'. 'Triste, Triste' is another prime example of Harwood using her impressive knowledge to both crush stereotypes of female poets and lend deeper meaning to her poems. Triste, Triste is abundant in religious references and

symbolism which offer duality in meaning. For example, the line ' Body rolls back like a stone, and risen/ spirit walks to Easter light;' is a blatant reference to the resurrection of Christ (made blatant by the direct reference to Easter, the Christian holiday which celebrates Christ's resurrection), and carefully details the act of Christ emerging from his tomb (' Body rolls back like a stone') and rising into the mortal world once more (' risen spirit walks to Easter light;'). These lines' dual meaning lies in the reference not only to Christ's resurrection but any form of rebirth and reinvention- be it of a person and their morals and attitudes, of material possessions, or in a broader societal and political sense.

This application of knowledge clearly demonstrates Harwood's academic knowledge and highly developed poetic abilities which stretch far, far beyond the limits of a traditional ' housewife'. Much like ' The Sharpness of Death', in ' Triste, Triste' Harwood goes beyond basic retelling of her broad knowledge and adopts a critical stance on the Christian religion and its effects on the values of certain people who subscribe to these beliefs, as their faith can be both their savior and their detriment. The lines ' falls from its dream to the deep/ to harrow heart's prison so heart may waken/ to peace in the paradise of sleep. ' discuss the way some of those who subscribe to Christianity build up and romanticise the promised kingdom of heaven (Christian's beliefs about the life after death) to the point where they neglect their own mortal lives in eager wait of death and let their lives suffer as a consequence of this neglect, and therefore become malnourished and unsatisfactory- making death an even more idealistic notion in comparison. Harwood directly refers to this concept of death, or as she calls it, ' sleep', in the line ' so heart

may waken to peace in the paradise of sleep'. This line is possibly the most poignant of the poem, and through subtle sarcasm she discusses the tragedy of these people believing no mortal life (the only thing that is a certainty) will possibly match up to the peace and perfection one is promised to automatically receive when reaching the kingdom of heaven (something that is far from a certainty), thus wasting their lives in the futile hope of an award of paradise for their life-long blind faith. In 'The Sharpness of Death' time is a fundamental concept at the very heart of all themes discussed in the poem- from loss, to love, to academia.

Harwood's incredible grasp of human emotion's ability to transcend time proves her higher mindedness, something which distinguishes her as an accomplished literary master and not a simple 'housewife'. Time's transcendent power in relation to death, grief and mourning is discussed throughout all four sections of 'The Sharpness of Death'. In the poem, Harwood suggests that the power of memory and nostalgia can help soften the 'sharp' effects of death, aid the grieving process and allow those who are grief stricken to understand death as part of the human experience and ultimately come to terms with the loss. In part III: Nasturtiums, Harwood talks about the loss of someone who can be presumed an old romantic lover from the speaker's youth, and how, in her later years, the memories of the sweetness and beauty of their time together can ease the pain of the loss. The lines 'Seed of the seed of countless seasons/ blossoms to hold the light that's gone.' refer to this as 'Seed of the seed of countless seasons' refers to the resilience and unwavering potency of nostalgia and memory, and the timelessness of memories.

The line ' blossoms hold the light that's gone' has a dual meaning, as it talks about how the flowers she brought to her lover many years ago still continue to bloom and undergo the cycle of life despite the passing of time and the change it brings, and also uses blossoms as a symbol of memory (the use of a soft, vibrant, beautiful and delicate flower for memories is very deliberate as Harwood is enforcing that memories also share these qualities), and how these memories hold ' light' for her in times of grave darkness and misery. This complex understanding and employment of the concept of time is something indisputably exclusive to masters of the literary arts, and certainly not something a stereotypical ' housewife' could grasp. ' Triste, Triste' is also rich with references to human emotion's transcendent power over time, once again implying Harwood's higher consciousness and wisdom and cementing her as a truly skilled poet. The poem's consistent and flowing religious references and symbolism are an example of human emotion standing the test of time- in both the history of Christianity itself and the life-long faith and devotion Christians may possess. The story of the suffering Christ endured for the love of his followers is possibly the most famous example of the resilience of human emotion throughout the ages, and Harwood manipulates this to serve the meaning of her poem and to allow its intended effects become more universal.

The lines "' I was with you in agony. Remember your promise of paradise," and hammers and hammers, " Remember me. "' describe, in a truly confronting manner, the physical, emotional and mental agony Christ endured for his loyal followers when he was sentenced to death by being nailed to the cross. The repetition of ' and hammers and hammers'

symbolises the physical act of hammering Christ to the cross and places emphasis on the unimaginable extent of the physical suffering Christ endured, thus drawing more emphasis on the incredible emotional investment Christ had in his followers.

Christ's alleged love for his followers has stood the test of time and created one of the most ancient and widely practiced religions in the world, proving the incredible transcendent power of human emotion over time, as without such a thing it would be impossible for the tale of one man's life and death to hold such power and influence over millions of people over thousands of years. Harwood's in depth knowledge of Christianity and her skilful manipulation of this story to strengthen her own meaning and arouse emotion and understanding from a wider audience is yet another example of how she does not fit into the category of a simple 'housewife'. Gwen Harwood's poetry has an undeniable ability to captivate almost any reader regardless of their background due to her deep understanding of the universal nature of human experience. Her works, in particular 'The Sharpness of Death' and 'Triste, Triste', can be appreciated on a higher academic level due to their abundant references to philosophy, Ancient Greece and Christianity, and also on a less complex and informed level due to Harwood's ability to stimulate a variety of human emotions in her readers through her understanding of the human condition. It is for these reasons that the derogatory label of 'a Tassie housewife poet' is a gross underestimation of Harwood's poetic abilities, abilities which should place her among some of the greatest poets in all history.