

# LITERATURE

## Gwen Harwood's Poetry as a Mirror of Her Own Journey

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As her poetry mirrors her own journey, Gwen Harwood delves into a lifetime of painful experiences and cherished memories, drawing inspiration to write episodic tales of powerful yearning. In every single one of her poems her inherent desires come across through her minute choice of symbolism and themes. Influenced by a lifelong love of music, a background in religious instruction and her absolute need for keeping memories alive, Harwood unveils her endorsement of women's rights, depicts the building of her own identity and reflects upon her tumultuous relationships as she groups words into carefully crafted poetic texts.

Being raised in a matrilineal family of strong-willed women, the "lady poet" stood for equalitarian rights for both sexes as she treasured a woman's freedom of the mind to live and write as a woman pleases. Even so, Harwood acknowledges the beauty of traditional roles. She admits in this poem that it was her mother's domestic safety, a place where she could run to and have a "supper set out" for her as well as a "voice" of reason to rely on, that saved her from the patriarchal burden as her mother "call[ed her] in as darkness / [fell] on [her] father's house". As in "The Secret Life of Frogs" it was through her mother's conforming to the social expectations that she was able to grow up and create her own identity in blissful ignorance about the horrors of the war, as she thought "a brothel was a French / hotel that served hot broth to diggers". Her yearning for a life led beyond the boundaries of what was gender-proper is further emphasised when she belatedly tells her mother that this need is "for you, for the wild / daughters becoming women, / anguish of seasons burning / backwards in time" – an attempt to live in freedom to honour the memory of women before her who were not allowed the same opportunities. They spent their lives "folding a little towel" and only "live[d] to see Halley's Comet" once, meaning their lives were confined to domesticity without any room allowed to a spark of anything else purposeful.

Though her poetry may be labelled as feminist for her condemnation of a society that forced women's "fabric of marvels [to be] folded down to a little space" and for her depiction of motherhood as a "tyrannic kingdom", Harwood hints in her poetry of a life never led by strict and extremist views. Her poetry is full of examples of a married life in which she allowed them to be "husband and wife for so long [they] have forgotten / all singularity". There are also depositions of how they "understand old clichés truly", perhaps alluding that she herself was seduced by the comfort offered by the expected roles of women, which had provided her with the much needed kindred spirit she found within the confines of marriage. Being her husband a man she could look up to and respect, for he worked "three years with [their] three sons [...] to build" the boat, their family's escape, she realised she had found a diamond in the rough of patriarchy. Far from being fruit of hypocrisy, however, her poetry is all about her quest to find her true identity – no wonder different poems penned in different times in her life may seem to contradict themselves, or even explore the different sides of a same opinion.

While trying to stand for herself as someone "beyond habit, household, children" Harwood lets into her poems other of her vital personality traits, as her collection of poetry is influenced by her musical education and religious upbringing. Biblical allusions permeate her works, as she refers to the story of Noah's ark in the building of her family's boat "Iris" to also symbolise personal deliverance from the "heavy yoke of [the] land", filled with her obligations as a daughter, wife and mother. Harwood also utilises her extensive knowledge of the Bible to bring even more depth into her tales as she alludes to Moses' forty year-long desert journey to find the place he belonged to, juxtaposing that quest to her own "lived or dreamed" years during which she further developed her relationship with her father. The astounding difference between her views of him as an "old No-Sayer" as a child and her "stick-thin comforter" also parallel the development of her ever-changing identity as a whole. At first she wanted power over her father and wanted him to comfort her but when that finally

happened she found out “the season that seemed / incredible” is anything but fulfilling. This constant transformation in turn affects the collection of her life’s work, as she evolves and changes as a person and her writing, along with its themes, grows and matures with her.

It is because of this evolution and maturation as a human being that the poet relies so much upon her memories as the most powerful tool to bring back the past, to prolongate the duration of cherished and long lost moments that cannot be relived as well as to ground her carefully constructed self, lapidated by these very experiences. Events that take place in the present, such as when “Mr Gabriel Fur, [her] Siamese / brings to the hearth a Common Toadlet”, have the power to transport her back in life, and these memory-driven time-travels are one of her major sources of inspiration. Harwood values these memory-driven time-travels so much due to her acute sensitivity to the passing of time as she knows life is made of “ambiguous light. Ambiguous sky”, full of uncertainty, just as she knows “it will soon / be night” and her existence will cease. She has grown to realise that there is no use in crying “where’s morning gone” but still delves into the past, either not acknowledging that this will further reduce her already small time to live in the now or merely accepting that it is better to keep relieving the good moment’s by “dreaming life’s useless time away”.

One of the most powerful techniques she utilises to resonate deeply within her audience is rhythm. The audience reads these poems about the dichotomy between the glorious ignorance of the past, as her featured recurring memories tend to paint a picture of her childhood, and the impeding doom-filled present, and what allows her to shift from one time to another are the rhythmic verses. Of all the genres in Literature, Harwood specialised in poetry perhaps because it offered her the closest association from her written words to her life-long study of music. It is not only a theme throughout her collection, as she refers to aspects of melodies and music-related terms as well as setting poems in the context of musical presentations. Music is also the key to the brilliant enjambment of her poems, allowing for both a better reading of the words, as they flow with song-like rhythm, and for this shifting from past to present, from reality to memories, to occur. As she utilises a different spacing in the second stanza of “The Secret Life of Frogs”, Harwood is bridging the gap between these two eras, gently introducing her memories. Similarly, the spacing in the last stanza of “The Violets” allows for her differentiation between today and yesterday. Rhythm also emphasises the author’s attitudes by highlighting some verses through rhyme and enjambment. In the very line she says “years cannot move” the presence of her memories, she moves the word themselves – perhaps signifying that, to some extent, they managed to. Her memories are fading and no longer hold the power of the right now.

All in all, Harwood’s complex and at times seemingly disconnected collection of poems are merely a written legacy of her life-long journey of the building of her identity and of self-discovery. Her rhythmic portrayals of her views on women’s experiences within a suffocating society are used alongside the absolute importance of the recalled to build one’s identity, also adjoined to tales apparently inspired by her own chaotic relationships. All these various inspirations serve to unveil one same common, yet profoundly moving, cry of yearning throughout her pieces: “give me my atmosphere, or let me die”.