

## ENGLISH: *HARWOOD*

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Gwen Harwood's poetry explores the universal issues evoked through the maturation process from youth to old age which includes the loss of innocence and the realisation of the transience of time and life. Furthermore, many poems emphasise the rejuvenating power of memories as catalysts for reaching an acceptance of these timeless and universal concerns. These ideas are explored in the poems "The Sharpness of Death", "At Mornington" and "Father and Child".

In "The Sharpness of Death", Harwood explores the difficulties faced in the journey towards the acceptance of death. Part One of this poem expresses Harwood's belief that in order to find an acceptance of death, one must first "immerse yourself in the shades". The metaphorical title of this poem encompasses the main idea of the poem in suggesting the difficulty which people have in accepting death. Also, the varying tone of the poem from demanding, to accusing, and then pleading demonstrates the personal responses to death in one's journey to accept it. Harwood has written in the form of a dramatic monologue which creates more emphasis on the experiences of the persona. The imperative "Leave me alone" to begin the poem establishes the persona's perspective on death as a struggle to accept its inevitability. Also, the personification of "Death" allows the persona to address death directly, emphasising the persona's struggle and reviling attitude towards it. To further convey the persona's refusal to accept death, Harwood associates it with negative connotative words: "desolate", to emphasise the loneliness of the persona's mother; and "obscene", to link death with negative feelings. The persona's attempt to appease the personified "Death" when she states "Look...Take these, the world will bless you" demonstrates the modern desperation to avoid death. Harwood also includes her repeated idea of making the most of what time you have in "Give me more time for time that was never long enough".

Harwood emphasises the brevity of time and life in "The Sharpness of Death". In Part II, Harwood's referral to philosophers is metaphorical of the innate need to come to terms with death. Despite this, the repetition of "untranslatable" in conjunction with exclamations conveys the difficulty in rationalising with the inevitability of death. Harwood later contrasts memories with the present in both Part III and Part IV to emphasise their significance in her journey to accepting the inevitability of death. Harwood describes the persona in the memory as a "Schoolgirl" which has connotations of youth and innocence at the beginning of one's life. She later uses light to symbolise life in: "the light that's gone" to emphasise the brevity of time and its effect on life. Harwood also includes the idea expressed in "At Mornington" of precious moments being fleeting as "Light...stayed with us briefly and moved on." To further emphasise the transience of life as time progresses, Harwood contrasts the youthful persona in the first half of Part III with the old and wise persona in the second half. Part IV of the poem is written in monologue style like Part I which creates a cyclical structure to emphasise the persona's accepting attitude towards death at the end of her emotional journey compared to the repugnant approach expressed in Part I. Harwood's personification of death in "If I fall from that time, then set your teeth in me" demonstrates her strong belief in the significance of memories as unchangeable despite the transience of time and life which is an underlying idea expressed in her poetry.

Harwood explores the complexity of time and how this shapes the differing perspectives on universal issues in adulthood compared with childhood in "At Mornington". To establish the childhood persona in the first stanza, Harwood creates a feeling of movement with "I leapt from my father's arms" which conveys her exuberance and later the simile: "I...rolled like a doll", conveying her innocence. The naivety the child is later emphasised with the biblical allusion to Jesus "walk[ing] on water" which demonstrates the child's lack of understanding and concern for life's issues. This youthful outlook is contrasted with the persona's father; "half comforting, half angry" which conveys his mature and realistic view on the situation compared with that of the child. The contrast in the movement captured in the first stanza compared with the stillness and "silence" in the second

stanza is representative of the decrease in exuberance during the lifetime of an individual growing older. This conveys the effect of time and ageing to shape one's outlook on universal issues.

Also in "At Mornington", Harwood explores the significance of personal experiences gained with age in contributing to one's understanding and acceptance of timeless concerns in. The understanding of death is presented as a process which can only be obtained through time passing and by "immersing yourself in the shades". This is demonstrated in the second stanza in which "autumn" is symbolic of the stage of the persona's life. The acceptance which the older persona has gained regarding death is expressed through the serene tone and the repeated affirmation "we have the wholeness of this day" in the second and fourth stanza which expresses the idea of valuing what time you have. The cyclical structure of this poem further emphasises this gradual process of gaining an acceptance of death as the movement from childhood to adulthood demonstrates the journey which must be undertaken. Also, the use of water as a motif throughout this poem to represent a constant despite the transience of all living things demonstrates the persona's acceptance of this.

Similarly, in "Father and Child", the personal development to gain an acceptance of the transience of life is demonstrated through the experiential learning of a child. The first part of the poem is representative of the individual journeys and experiences individuals undertake to gain maturity and wisdom. Harwood establishes the childhood persona in the first part of the poem through use of short sentences in combination with monosyllabic words. As well as this, it is written in past tense as a reflection of Harwood's childhood. To convey the innocence of the child, Harwood contrasts the responsible adult as the "old No-Sayer" with the naïve child seeking power: "I crept out with my father's gun." The shooting of the owl in the fourth stanza is the event that is symbolic of the child's loss of innocence which is demonstrated through the contrast of the child's immense sense of power before the shooting with her father "robbed of power" compared with her leaning her "head upon my father's arm" and weeping after shooting the owl the final time. The repetition of the "fallen gun" represents the child's loss of innocence through shooting the owl which is symbolic of death and wisdom. Also, the use of sight as a motif in this poem is used to emphasise how life experiences affect one's innocence and result in gaining wisdom and maturity. The repetition of "what I had begun", first spoken by the father and then by the child, demonstrates her understanding of the event and the significance of experiential learning.

The cycle of life is demonstrated throughout the two parts of "Father and Child" which follows the personal development of the persona towards both the beginning and end of her life. Harwood presents this poem in two parts: "Barn Owl", which symbolises new beginnings, and "Nightfall" which is symbolic of death. This conveys the different stages of the persona's life and the corresponding outlooks on life and death. The second part of the poem contrasts the first part as the persona has developed an awareness and acceptance of death due experiential learning. The cycle of life is demonstrated by the oxymoron "ancient innocence" in describing the father as the roles between the father and the daughter have been reversed due to ageing. The motif of water in At Mornington as representative of life is likewise symbolic in this poem where the father's "dry hand" conveys his age. The development of the daughter through experiential learning is demonstrated as she was once a child "quick to mischief" who has "grown to learn". The cycle of death is emphasised in the last stanza which states "...night and day are one" as this creates a cyclical structure that conveys the ability of memories to make things immortal despite death and the transience of life.

Harwood's poetry explores the differing aspects of life which individuals have come to accept, to convey the universal issues and concepts which have remained timeless. This enhances the reader's acceptance of the transience of all living things to develop a better understanding of the natural world.