

ENGLISH: *SELECTED POEMS, GWEN HARWOOD*

Gwen Harwood Poetry Analysis

In “The Lion’s Bride” and “Prize Giving”, Gwen Harwood explores the stark dichotomy between conventional genders roles, ultimately exposing the destructive nature of marriage and the institution.

Prize Giving illustrates the contrasts between the stereotypical gender roles of “man and intellect” and “woman and nature”. Professor Eisenbart is “pressed/with dry scholastic jokes to change his mind” exemplifying his affiliation with the academic realm and matters pertaining to the mind. Wearing academic dress, he adopts the pose of “Rodin’s Thinker”, further accentuating his connection to the culture of rational mentality and academia. Harwood subjects the male cliché to severe satire as Eisenbart is portrayed as a ridiculously pompous and pretentious man. He is described as an arrogant and proud figure who “rudely declined” the invitation as an “honoured guest”. Moreover, Harwood creates an underpinning mocking tone towards his egotistical character. “To lend/a distinction of a kind not specified”, suggests superficiality to his apparent “distinction”, also the titian haired girl, who ultimately renders him to a “sage fool”, mocks his pose of “Rodin’s thinker”. In contrast, women are affiliated with the natural world, emotion and corporeality. The girls are described with animal imagery such as “insect nervousness” and “mouse-brown” hair. The degrading metaphor captures the gender hierarchy of patriarchal society; equating women to subhuman levels thus, elevating the rank of man. Even the Headmistress is rendered inferior to man and is reduced to a mere body part, “the Head”, reflecting the disempowerment of woman in patriarchal society. The image of “half-hearted blooms/tortured to form the school’s elaborate crest” suggests that nature is being forcibly contorted for the girls to be able to fit artificially into the institution. Eisenbart “scowled with violent distaste” at the attempt to assimilate into a traditionally male realm, revealing his vanity and pride of masculine persona. However, the “titian-haired girl” subverts his belief of masculine power and he must elevate her to the standard of Mozart and exchanges her “casual school girl’s” for a “master’s air”. The gender roles are ultimately swapped as the formerly indifferent scholar becomes overwhelmed with emotion and is trapped by the young schoolgirl. Through Prize Giving, Gwen Harwood carefully constructs the patriarchy of society and illuminates the contrasting concepts of gender stereotyping.

The Lion’s Bride, ironically in the form of a traditionally romantic Petrarchan sonnet, is an indictment on marriage and the institution as well as clichéd gender roles. Stereotypical gender role of the lion’s hyper-masculinity is juxtaposed with the bride’s femininity. Harwood’s use of a lion, “a brute king”, highlights masculinity while the bride is “tender”, “soft” and “warm” exemplifies conventional feminine characteristics of a “tender woman”. From the beginning of the second stanza, the harsh tone “icy spectre sheathed”, a sharp contrast from the tender sensuality of the first stanza, foreshadows the impending tragic turn of events. The imagery of natural versus the unnatural suggests the death of individuality through marriage. Sacrificing her “warm human smell” for “pointed feet”, “painted lips”, “scented veil” and an “unreal head”, marriage and the institution have reduced her to “a ghost [that] has bones, and meat”. At her loss of identity she has become a vacant being devoid of emotion and personality, diminished to “bones and meat”. The ominous “rank longing of the lion” and “love feast” builds up to a crescendo as vicious metaphors “ripped” and “engorged” exhibit the marriage savagely consuming her, destroying her individual identity, thus she has become a mere ghost of herself, which the lion can no longer recognize. Through the tragedy of the lion and the bride, Harwood exemplifies the detrimental effects of marriage on the demise of individuality.

Presenting them as a destructive force, Harwood scorns institution and marriage. Harwood also subjects the stark polarity between gender stereotypes to satire as the construction of patriarchal society and the disparagement of females is brought to light in the poems.