

Harwood's poetry explores the experiences of women in society.

The patriarchy of the society and the self-realisation that dawns on women in relation to societal expectations within the context and period of Australian history of which poet Gwen Harwood constructed her poetry, is observed, sometimes criticized and often challenged in the collection of poems found in the text 'Gwen Harwood, Selected Poems'. The representation of the images of men, women and gender differences to which a society consciously or unconsciously subscribes are captured through her writings. Written across a time of immense change in societal values, Harwood's observation of the experiences of women in society exemplify some of the techniques used by the poet in illustrating the tendency of society to categorize the roles and expectations of the male and female. Through contrast, juxtaposition and powerful imagery, Harwood demonstrates the subservience of women to men in 'The Lion's Bride', 'Burning Sappho' and 'Suburban Sonnet', but also suggests possible change in 'Prize Giving'.

Marriage is the destruction of a woman's self and leads to the loss of identity. Written in the traditional form of love poetry, a sonnet, the iambic pentameter verse of 'The Lion's Bride' does not lead the reader to notion of true love and happy ever after, but rather the savage destruction of a bride devoured by her husband. Written from the perspective of an anthropomorphised groom as a lion, the powerful imagery of "I ripped the veil...engorged the painted lips" connotes the devouring of a woman's identity by the beast-like male. This loss is further reinforced by Harwood's use of the language of possession with "my love...my bride" indicating ownership once the wedding is consummated. The possession of women by men is earlier explored in the poem through the extended metaphor as the groom as a lion being "fed...well" by the bride's father, thus demonstrating that in the social context of this poem, 1960s Australia, women were possessions, passed from their father to husband. Just as Harwood distorts the traditional nature of the sonnet in order to highlight that women are possessions of men, the form of sonnet has also been used to criticise the patriarchal beliefs around motherhood in 1960s Australia.

Motherhood, the "greatest joy" can be both positive and negative. Written during a time of transition of the traditional belief of the role in women in society, Harwood explores the duality of emotions that surrounds motherhood. Two such poems, 'Suburban Sonnet' and 'Burning Sappho' focus on motherhood, and are autobiographical in nature, however both poems were constructed under the pseudonym of Miriam Stone. 'Suburban Sonnet', again not a poem of traditional love or compare, explores the duty the poet feels as a mother, friend, wife and lover that she must provide to others before she focuses on her work as a poet. Suburban Sonnet explores the daily drudgery of a once promising musician, who "played for Rubinstein", now practising only for her children while the "pot boils over" and zest and love metaphorically "drain out with soapy water" while scouring "the crusted milk". In both poems, this image of drudgery and duty as a mother contrasts with the feminine role of the artist. Harwood, herself a poet and housewife in Tasmania was living this contrast. Perhaps she published under a pseudonym to present

to her readers that these poems are more than just a personal lament, but rather a comment on society that in order for a woman to be a mother, she must forgo her passions and career. Interestingly, the final line of the couplet from *Suburban Sonnet* finishes with the italicized cliché “tasty dishes from stale bread” that shows that even though society pushes women to this position and emotion, there is a silver lining and that is that motherhood is the greatest joy.

Determination to shift societal expectations starts with one individual. In 'Prize-Giving', Harwood challenges the status quo of the male dominated society of Australia in the 1950s and 60s through one “titian haired” girl. This is done in comparison to the arrogance and self-importance of the central character, Professor Eisenbart, whom illuminates the distinction and hierarchy of which males are heralds of in a patriarchal society. When asked to attend a girl schools award ceremony as an “honoured guest” the professor “rudely declined; but from indifference agreed, when pressed with dry scholastic jokes, to change his mind, to grace their humble platform”. Harwood’s utilization of submissive language in describing the female gender mirrors the powerful, assertive words in describing the Professor. By placing the male gender on a higher grounding, this represents the way in which the patriarchal society favours this gender over the disempowered and ignorant female. Harwood furthers the submissiveness of women to men through the use of metaphor in placing the headmistress and the girls in the same levels as birds and insects suggest the deprivation of the female gender in equating them to less than human. The presentation of these 'airy' movements prove contrast to the 'Rodin's Thinker' of the Professor. Again the association of the male to sophistication and confidence shine through in the patriarchal culture constructed, reinforcing the marginalism of the female. By presenting such contrasting concepts of both genders, the poet exhibits the way society consciously and sometimes unconsciously constructs the privileging of the male. In representing the dichotomy of arts and science as typical of each gender, the poem deals with the academic and logical resident of the male in opposition to the passionate whimsicality of the female. The empowerment of usually hidden traits in society such as music and femininity enforce a ridiculed reading of the stereotypical male, Eisenbart. In his arrogance and inability to accept passion and feeling over logic and intellect, this character has been portrayed as being entrapped by his own ignorance. When Eisenbart sees the girl with “titian hair” he is hypnotized and confused by her seduction and his lust for her. This conveys the power of female sexuality in a patriarchal society, and enforces the concept of some power residing with the usually helpless and lower gender. The freedom and passion of the piece of Mozart played by the girl is also overwhelming, and a celebration of art, music and the feminine over the scientific masculine is attained. The entrapment of Eisenbart and the reversal of roles and possession of power, illuminated by the destruction of the character's rational, and of course patriarchal, values, exemplify the presentation of the power and domination of 'naturally' submissive traits. That is, society subscribes the arts and music as natural interests of a feminine audience, and of less importance than the scientific and mathematical realm in which Eisenbart has been constructed. When Eisenbart's world has been turned around, a challenge to society’s views are illustrated.

Gwen Harwood explores through many of her poems the role of women in society. Harwood's observations, criticisms and challenges reflect the changing nature of Australian society and expectations of women. From her criticism of the male dominated society of the 1950s and 1960s, with its entrenched beliefs and reinforcing of female disempowerment, to the duality of motherhood and ultimately the foreshadowing of a shift to feminism with her "titian" haired girl, Harwood powerfully evokes a range of emotions in her readers to demonstrate that women are powerful beings, capable of challenging long standing beliefs while still maintaining roles such as mother, friend, wife and lover.