

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
**“Gwen Harwood: Selected
Poems 1943 -1995”**

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SAMPLE

AUTHOR NOTES

Gwen Harwood was born in 1920 in Brisbane, Australia. She trained as a musician in her early years, specifically in piano and organ. She moved to Hobart in 1945, the last year of the Second World War, after she married Bill Harwood. She remained in Hobart until she died, but Brisbane and Queensland remained a strong presence in her poetry. She died in 1995.

Her poetry was well received in and after the 1960s. She had published a few works in the 40s and 50s but she did not come to public attention until 1963 when her first book was published.

Harwood was a mother, a wife as well as a secretary but she had a sharply academic mind. Harwood wrote poetry, librettos, and many letters, which are very highly regarded and have been published into a volume entitled 'Blessed City' (1990).

For a full account of Harwood's life and works, read through the comprehensive 'References' section included at the end of the text guide.

This extract is taken from the VCAA text guide, provided by the Board of Studies (See 'References' section). It should give you a clear indication of the sort of things the examiners will be looking for in terms of ideas when writing on the poems:

'Gwen Harwood is one of Australia's finest poets. Her work deals with a range of subjects, from the relationships between children and parents and the domestic aspects of women's lives, to the impact of societal expectations on individual identity and the role of art and memory in shaping subjectivity. Harwood's poetry both masters and challenges poetic forms and conventions. The poems experiment with voice, play with language and are often underpinned by a deeply-grounded, satirical wit.'

CONTEXT

Born in 1920 in Brisbane, Harwood grew up in a time of female under-privilege. She was unable to get her work published before the 1960s when she was already in her forties. Harwood considered herself to be a fully-fledged artist by the time she was published and her work was quickly recognized. However she still suffered under the stigma of being a woman and this was something she actively railed against. As part of her attempts to expose the inequality between male and female writers, Harwood adopted several pseudonyms, such as Walter Lehmann, Miriam Stone, Francis Geyer and Timothy Kline. She was quite secretive about her 'hoaxes' and would often dismiss even her friends' attempts to find out the names she used.

Harwood was proved right on several occasions about her suspicions that male writers were favoured over women, as many of her poems were rejected under her name yet were published under Walter Lehmann's. Harwood is famous for her scathing criticism of editors even including the acrostic 'Fuck All Editors' in one of the poems she submitted for publication. However her vehemence waned in later times.

Harwood was an avid reader with an interest in European (particularly German) art, history and philosophy. She read enthusiastically on Wittgenstein and, his ideas on language appear in many of her poems. She also spoke some German and this is evidenced in her intermittent use of German words and phrases in her poems. Harwood's erudition informs her style of writing and almost every poem is littered with references to other texts, many philosophical in nature, or biblical. Harwood also trained as a novice nun; her knowledge of religious texts and history is profound and she makes many subtle allusions to religious events or mythologies in her poems, though she does not fully subscribe to them in her beliefs.

Harwood trained from a young age in music, particularly piano and organ and she wrote many librettos and worked on opera scores as well as writing poetry. Her musical knowledge undoubtedly influenced the way she played with rhythm and meter in her work, often getting bored with traditional metre and breaking out into hexameter and other variations that were rare and produced a sharper, more definite quality to her poems. Many of the poems in this collection follow the sonnet structure or have individual rhythm and metre that are crucial to their reading.

Harwood was also a mother and a wife, and these roles greatly influenced her writing. She freely wrote about the constraints of being a woman, the search for identity in a world that expected her to be something different. Yet despite the anger she felt at literary and social exclusion, Harwood's poems are also filled with the joys of motherhood and the love she felt for her family and friends.