

Writing on poetry



A perceptive, expressive answer will show engagement with the poetry rather than a 'list' of poetic features.

Sample responses on Harwood's *Collected Poems*

The following sample response on Gwen Harwood's *Collected Poems* is based on the three passages from the 2009 VCE Literature examination. The passages are the following three complete poems:

- 'A Kitchen Poem'
- 'The Lion's Bride'
- 'The Twins' (from 'Class of 1927').

Brief overview of the three poems and an indication of some of the ideas which will be discussed in the response.

Ideas about marriage and motherhood, and their effects on women, are explored in the poetry of Gwen Harwood. In 'The Lion's Bride', a 'warm, human' woman becomes an 'icy spectre' as a 'painted' bride. Marriage transforms the farmer's wife in 'A Kitchen Poem' to a silent object of her husband's admiration, while the mother in 'The Twins' dies giving birth. Harwood's poems often show women attempting to accommodate the demands made on them as wives, mothers and lovers, often struggling to establish a strong, independent sense of identity.

Awareness of a strong feature of Harwood's style.

In exploring these ideas Harwood draws on the poetic traditions of a male-dominated literary genre – often subverting it with humorous irony. 'The Lion's Bride' adopts the form traditionally associated with love poetry – the sonnet – to undermine romantic ideas about love. Harwood's poems reveal that love and marriage, far from ensuring women a life of wedded bliss, can constrain women's lives, as they do with the farmer's wife in 'A Kitchen Poem', 'too great with child to sit at ease'. The freedom enjoyed by the woman in 'The Lion's Bride' is temporary. At first she 'came daily with our special bowl', already fulfilling a traditional wifely duty, but still having the freedom to leave. The narrative structure of 'The Lion's Bride' highlights the difference between the 'barefoot ... tender woman' described in the octave, and the mincing 'bride', with 'pointed feet' and 'painted lips', in the sestet.

Reference to another passage shows an ability to move between passages. This enables the discussion to consider the passages in a coherently structured response rather than as separate responses to each of the poems.

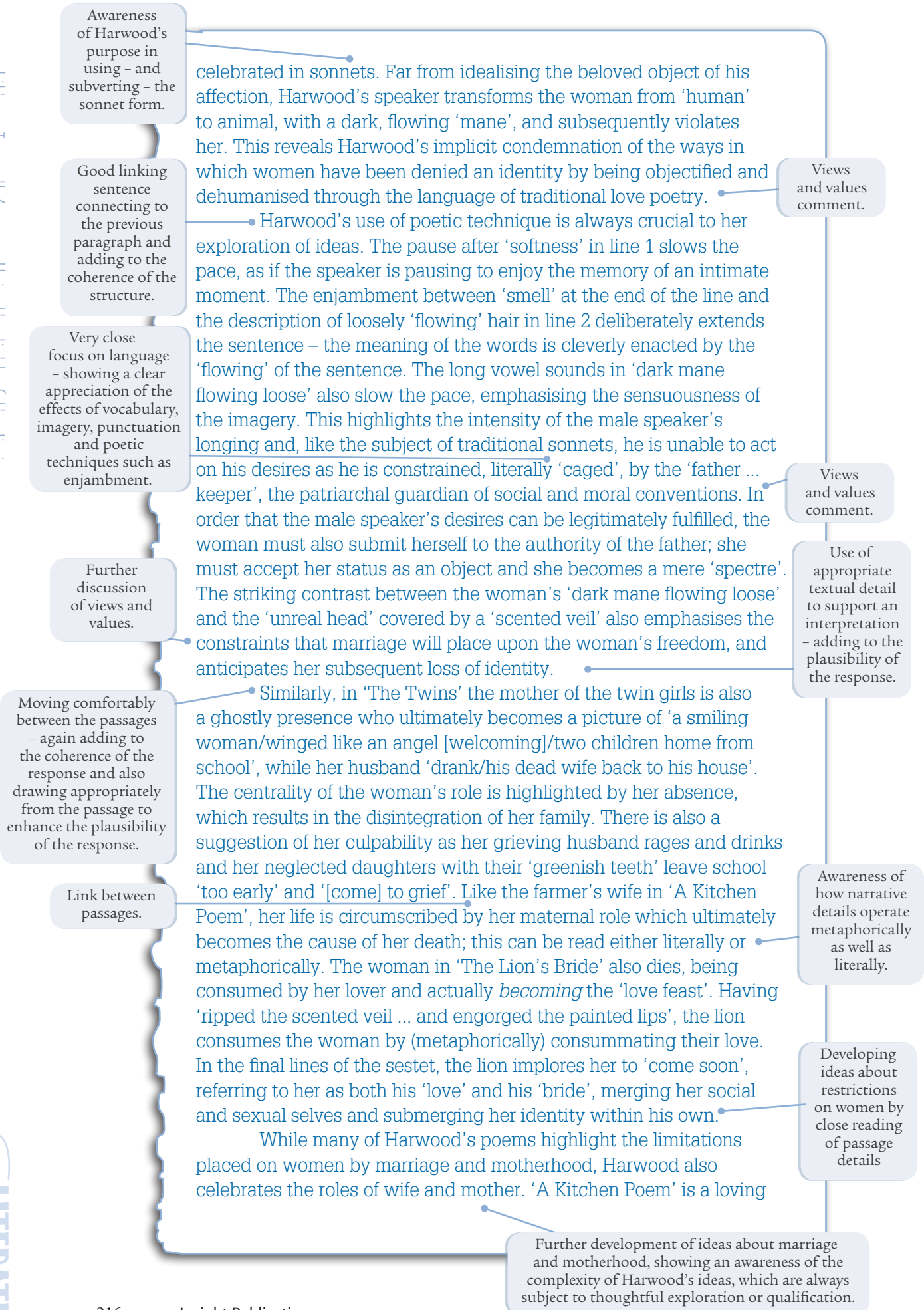
Understanding of the form of the poem and the purpose for which it is used.

The quotations from the passages are 'woven' seamlessly into the writer's sentences – adding to the fluency of the writer's style.

Awareness of the conventions of the sonnet form.

The regularity of the rhyme scheme throughout is in strict keeping with the poetic conventions of the sonnet form, reminding readers that the sonnet is an established poetic way of conveying ideas about love. Also in keeping with this tradition, Harwood's male speaker is the subject of the poem, while the woman is the 'object', valued only because of her relationship with the speaker. Harwood subverts these ideas, however, by dispensing with the usually strict rhythmical patterns of the sonnet; there is little apparent regularity in the organisation of stressed and unstressed syllables in the poem, particularly in the octave. This departure from convention underpins Harwood's challenge to ideas about romantic love usually

It is not for my children I walk on earth in the light of the living! →



tribute to a wife's 'fruitfulness' and 'beauty'. Nevertheless, the sympathetic speaker recognises the subjugation of women to 'the fierce demands' of 'brats'. By contrast, he is dismissive of complaining female 'academics' and 'astringent lady poets', whose renunciation of a traditional female role has, in his eyes, entirely devalued them. His tone is contemptuous towards 'career-mad women' taking 'their stand against male dominance', and he commends intelligent women who resign themselves to sitting by the window, 'dreaming [themselves] away ... to scintillating life'. This idea is reinforced by the scathing tone of 'tongues ... cool with wit' of the 'keen bluestockings', which implicitly endorses the silence of the farmer's wife: 'we do not speak'. His tender feelings for her are revealed through the peaceful and bountiful natural imagery of 'ripening fields and orchards where/Orion leads a waterfall/of stars'. Yet like the woman in 'The Lion's Bride', the farmer's wife has had her identity subsumed, in this instance merging with the natural landscape. She is valued, like the farmer's land, for her passivity and productivity. Nevertheless, while many women's lives consist solely of 'children, work and daily bread', their strength and individuality is not always completely undermined by their maternal and domestic roles, as the 'dreaming' of the farmer's wife implies.

By contrast to the silent farmer's wife, the female speaker in 'An Impromptu for Ann Jennings' articulates ideas and expresses emotions. Her tone is reflective and quietly contented as she remembers the young mothers who kept their 'balance somehow through the squalling/disorder'. Celebrating female friendship as well, the speaker affirms the bond between women whose lives were 'surrendered' to love and who are 'content' to know their children 'walk the earth'. In 'Mother Who Gave Me Life', the daughter/speaker recognises the 'wisdom' of the mother, indeed all mothers, whose lives are an integral part of the 'fabric of marvels' woven by the lives of ordinary women. Like the wife in 'A Kitchen Poem', these mothers embrace their domestic role. In this most confessional of poems, Harwood draws explicitly on the 'fabric' of women's domestic lives for the material of her poetry, affirming her credentials as a poet, her identity as a woman who put her 'brains to use', and her celebration of wives and mothers.

Harwood's moving poems celebrate women's often uneventful lives and condemn the social expectations which limit their creativity. Through her own melding of the domestic and creative, Harwood demonstrates that the factors which limit women's independence and individuality can be overcome by intelligent and imaginative women.

(1267 words)

Highlights the use of tone, including changes in tone, to convey the speaker's emotions and values.

Thoughtful discussion of narrative details to show understanding of some of the poem's complex ideas – and the views and values it explores. Quotations seamlessly incorporated and purposefully used to support an interpretation.

Useful link between the passages.

Discussion of other poems on the list shows familiarity with Harwood's poetry, rather than just the selected passages.

Thoughtful link between the two poems adds to the plausibility of the interpretation.

Brief conclusion reminds the reader of the main idea explored in the response. Brief reference to Harwood's personal circumstances used judiciously to support the writer's interpretation of the poems.

Assessor comments

The writer has addressed the assessment criteria at a High to Very High level. The response is plausible, as the narrative details drawn from the set poems are carefully considered and used as the basis of an interpretation. In developing the interpretation, the writer shows a clear awareness of the poet's concerns – in particular, the limitations on women's lives. The writer also shows a good knowledge of the poet's work by drawing purposefully on other poems on the list to support the interpretation.

The examination passages are used well. There is some close analysis of language, imagery, tone and form. The writer's capacity to move comfortably between the poems and into the wider body of the poet's work adds considerably to the sophistication and the coherence of the response. Passage 2 is closely analysed and its features are used as a springboard to other passages and other poems on the list. There is also evidence of some wider critical reading in the writer's awareness of Harwood's feminist sympathies.

The writer's style is fluent and sophisticated, using language appropriate for literary analysis. The vocabulary includes words such as 'highlights', 'reveals', 'implies' and 'subverts', which indicate an awareness of the ways in which language, imagery, form and structure convey the poet's ideas. Also highly useful is the writer's recognition of the metaphorical significance of the narrative details of the poems, as many students' interpretations are too literal – discussing, for example, a relationship between a lion and a woman, or referring constantly to aspects of the poet's life. The writer's vocabulary also includes words such as 'endorses' and 'condemns', showing an awareness of the poet's views and values, which are discussed thoughtfully in connection with the details of the passages. The conclusion succinctly draws together the main ideas discussed.

At 1267 words, this response is longer than most exam responses, although some students do write two essays of this length in the available time. This response would score in the A to A+ range.