

Waikato Institute of Technology, Wintec, New Zealand

Gail Pittaway

Leave-taking

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway's current research interests include creative writing (poetry, short story and scripts), ritual elements in contemporary theatre and the history of food writing. She has edited two books; "Writers in the Gardens" and "Love Street" and has had stories broadcast on radio. Gail is also a national theatre critic and contributes regular live book reviews for the National Radio in New Zealand. She is a member of the New Zealand Communication Association, The Tertiary Writing Network, the New Zealand Society of Authors and since 2004, has been an executive member of the Australian Association of Writing Programmes. She lectures in the School of Media Arts, Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Keywords:

Creative writing – poetry – Dante

Leave taking

Afterwards
russet-haired Francesca
staggered home.

Around her feet
Skittish leaves clattered
on the cobblestones
like old bones thrown into a whirl wind;
like the sound of doors being opened
or furniture being scraped
or small fingers drumming
with impatience on leather-bound books.

I have no substance
I am adrift

Nearby from a tower
a Tuscan bell
moaned his name to the wind:
Pao-lo.

Exegetical statement: field of inquiry and context

This piece drives from the tension between a respect for high culture (as identified in Mathew Arnold's essay 'Culture and Anarchy'), with Dante's poetry being considered an epitome of achievement, and a feminist and postmodern inclination to consider such traditional texts as available to reinvention and rediscovery for modern poets (as do Atwood and Warner). In another classic, an essay by Modernist poet T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', the use of the term 'tradition' is both active and passive. A poet must embody 'the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer' while also reflecting and partaking of her/his contemporary context. Eliot argues that 'the most individual parts of his (the poet) work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'. This poem, then, is an attempt to investigate a traditional story from Dante's *Inferno* from a modern point of view, while still alluding to motifs from the original text.

Works cited

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Atwood, M. (2005) *The Penelopiad*, Cannongate, Edinburgh, Scotland.

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Warner, M. (1994) *Managing Monsters: Six myths of our time*, Vintage, London, UK.

Research statement

Research background

This poem alludes to the adulterous love affair of Paolo and Francesca, contemporaries of Dante Alighieri in the 13th century. In *the Divine Comedy*, Dante locates them in his Inferno (Hell), in circle 2 where the lustful are punished but, in some sympathy, places them in the whirlwind of lovers for one of the less serious sins. Here they whirl for eternity, caught up in this metaphorical depiction of the passion which has overtaken their reason and caused them to sin. The poem imagines Francesca returning to her husband from an assignation with Paolo, being reminded of her helplessness to change time or her circumstances by the moving autumn leaves at her feet.

Research contribution

There are operas, overtures, paintings and sculptures of Paolo and Francesca but very few textual version of the story (apart from libretti). William Blake's illustration of this encounter in Inferno is perhaps the best known depiction out of Italy and has been a strong influence on this poem. Blake's figures are luminous, disembodied, trapped. The form of the poem is intended to trap Francesca's 'I' statement within a third person narrative voice, just as she is trapped in the original account in Dante

Research significance

This original contribution is published in *TEXT*, the ERA A ranked journal, reflecting a larger body of poetry connected with the Seven Deadly Sins.

Works cited

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