Your Mind is a Door-and each reading a keyholeAre we destroying the unique and central meaning of a text when we impose upon it a specific perspective? Philip McGreevy, from The Writer’s Journal, explores the effect context and specific ‘readings’ have upon the meaning interpreted, and more importantly the meaning overlooked, in regard to Gwen Harwood’s poetry.

A consideration of Gwen Harwood’s poetry emphasises the effect context has on the reception of a poem by a specific audience. In the 1950s Harwood began publishing her poetry but the social trends of that era highly imposed her works reception. 1950s Australia was a male dominated society which had little respect for poetry, particularly that of a ‘Little Tassie housewife’ who was discussing controversial ideas and challenging social boundaries. She placed her work in The Bulletin but due to social stereotypes and discrimination, particularly by the bulletin editors, found herself unable successfully publish her work. This forced her to the use of pseudonyms (such as Walter Lehman) and eventually her frustration with both Australian society and the publishers of The Bulletin lead her to conduct the infamous Bulletin hoax. Her poetry was often viewed as domestic and personal and thus considered irrelevant. However some contemporaries, such as Alex Hope, Vincent Buckley and James McCauley, did appreciate Harwood’s work for the insight it provided. These literary figures realised the timeless ideas her work explored relating to existence, childhood, personal development, memory, time, life and death, and imagination. Not until much later were these perspectives adopted as a dominant reading of her work. Some commentators suggest consideration of various readings is to the detriment of an appropriate academic study of the poems. This can easily become the case when an audience only focuses on a single perspective which inevitably excludes alternative meanings. If our mind is a door then how can we expect to get the full picture if rather than opening the door we only look out a single keyhole? ‘At Mornington,’ is rich in layered meaning. However, through the application of certain readings can be overlooked as the responder can tend to focus on only a single aspect without recognising the wider range of concepts the text addresses. By applying a 1950s perspective we identify this poem as personal, trivial and mundane as portrayed near the end of the poem where natural imagery and structural indentation is used to describe a dream of the persona; “I dreamed once, long ago, that we walked among day-bright flowers to a bench in Brisbane gardens.” The use of personal pronouns ‘I’ & ‘we’ trap this poem into the hollow façade of meaningless and the deceptively literal presentation of the poem can mislead the audience to believe that the poem can provide nothing more than just a biographical recount. Personal tone, descriptors and pronouns are characteristic techniques of Harwood’s work and usually her poems are portrayed in the first person thus 1950s Australia viewed her work as inconsequential and insignificant. Her poetry, due to the strongly biographical nature, was seen to provide nothing more than an insight into Harwood’s past. At the beginning of the poem Harwood portrays a distant memory of childhood, “I leapt from my father’s arms and was caught by a wave and rolled like a doll among rattling shells.” Again the use of pronouns and the literal meaning of the statement give the poem a strongly personal nature. These memories of childhood and dreams, although important to the persona, can be looked at as irrelevant for a wider audience and thus Harwood’s work often came under scrutiny and was judged pointless and hollow. Such a perspective reinforces how dangerous a single interpretation can be when it alone is applied to the text.

“At Mornington” does address many personal experiences, however, this is not to say it is trivial. Harwood uses the personal as a means of explaining universal ideas to a wider audience. Through the application of a Romantic reading we see Harwood explore the nature of existence, time and reality through the framework of emotion, memory and experience. The simile “…was caught by a wave and rolled like a doll among rattling shells” is used by Harwood to combine with natural imagery to portray her own insignificance in the face of the overwhelming power of nature, time and death. She looks to and incorporates the natural world, particularly water and the ocean, in this poem, as a means of exploring realities beyond the physical, i.e. mysteries of death and time. At the end of the poem we see the experience of death expressed similarly to that of being crushed by the waves of the personà’s childhood. “…when I am seized at last and rolled in one grinding race from which no hand will save me…” Harwood uses descriptors, not unlike those used to describe the personas earlier encounter with the ocean (“rolled in one grinding race” and “rolled like a doll”), to portray, her transience and powerlessness against her mortality. Yet Harwood’s approach to death and her analysis of it through nature has allowed her to accept and understand her own transience and provokes us to investigate and contemplate our own impermanence. This contemplation is portrayed in the juxtaposition “I think of death no more than when… …I laughed at a hollowed pumpkin with candle flame for eyesight.” Through the application of a Romantic reading to Harwood’s poetry, we are able to learn about death, time, transience and existence from the natural world, by looking at its cyclic nature, its inevitability and death as an integral aspect of the living world. Although we can justify this reading is more valuable than that of the 1950s, no reading should be applied exclusively but rather we should incorporate as many readings as possible to unlock
our minds to a wider perspective.

‘The Glass Jar,’ contains multiple avenues of interpretation. Thus the use of readings as a means for deconstruction becomes ever more influential. Through application of a religious interpretation we find many allusions to Christ, his disciples and Christianity. Religious allusion is a trademark feature of Harwood’s poetry and prevails throughout the ‘Glass Jar’. “The sun’s disciples,” a pun on the Son of God, address the religious aspects with in the poem. The boy experiences a development of faith and begins with a total belief within the sun (in this case portrayed as a god-like figure of “total power [over] the commonplace of field and flower”) as his saviour. The boy is naïve and innocent and so too is his understanding of his own world. Through experience, gained knowledge and abandonment by his protector (the sun), he is forced to confront his fears and reassess his faith. Although he is devastated by the swift destruction of his hope, as conveyed by the metaphor “hope fell headlong from its eagle height . . . as she ran, sobbing his loss,” he is not left totally faithless. He no longer places total faith in his saviour but he has not totally abandoned all beliefs and we see this in the final stanza with the religious pun, “resurrected sun.” Although hope and faith were seemingly destroyed they still prevail reformed by the harsh lessons which shape them to create a new faith of caution and prudence. From this poem, and the application of a religious reading, we can discover that faith is constantly growing and changing. As we progress through life and are subjected to our own experiences so too are our beliefs; they are central to our inner-self and can never be completely lost.

There is much more meaning within this poem then just those questions of faith. To only apply a religious interpretation to ‘The Glass Jar’ would be to underestimate the achievement of Harwood’s work and in turn force us again into the perspective of the keyhole without ability to perceive the wider surrounds. To prevent compression of ideas it is important to apply other readings. Application of a Psychoanalytic reading to the ‘Glass Jar’ delves into questions about the inner self of the persona. As an audience we should be confronted by the fact that such a young boy is experiencing such horrors of “Pincer and claw, trident and vampire fang.” How could a boy of such innocence, so as to be able to believe in a jar to hold the sun’s light, summon wild, horrific and traumatising entities? The metaphor “his side long violence summoned fiends whose mosaic vision saw his heart entire” leads us to understand there is much more at play here than the innocent smile of ‘a child on one summer evening.’ We begin to understand the power of the mind to be able to create such demons; to be able to instil such fear but also we see how delicate it is. For Gwen Harwood, childhood and the inner self are both very much characteristic focuses for many of her poems and as an audience we can begin to see both the preciousness of a happy childhood (one unfortunately not entirely found in the poem) and our own responsibility to recognise the importance of the mind. In the poem there is a clue as to the source corrupting the boy, “. . . his comforter lay in his rival’s embrace . . .” uses descriptors to portray his parents which incline the audience to sense Oedipal overtones between the mother and child. The boy feels compelled to compete with his father for his mother’s affection (and in this case protection). The father actually takes form within the child’s fears in the metaphor; “His father held fiddle and bow, and scraped assent to the malignant ballet.” Again we find reinforcement of the vulnerability of innocence, childhood and our inner-self to be consumed and thus controlled by pain or powerful emotion. We have discovered both how useful and at the same time harmful applied readings can be. If used appropriately in conjunction with other readings then we can seek to extract a more complete understanding of the concepts portrayed. However, if used alone we may become aware of only one element of the text that can force us off on a tangent often resulting in the lack of appreciation for other perspectives.

Our mind is a door. When opened we have seemingly unlimited potential to explore any text. Each reading is a keyhole and each unlocks meaning. However, if we only open one lock the door itself remains closed and we find ourselves consticted to only what we can see from the perspective of that reading. If we are to truly understand and appreciate a text we must undo all locks and open our minds to the full range of possibilities. We cannot see through doors so it is naive to think without opening one we can look upon the world with anything greater than a keyhole perspective.

"the glass jar" - By Gwen harwood
"At Mornington" - By Gwen Harwood