

Two gates^[1] into Jane Hirshfield's poetry

Abstract

Despite Jane Hirshfield's having published eleven books of poetry, mostly with a focus on Zen Buddhism, and having received six awards for her poetry, there is a dearth of published criticism on her work. Most of the existing literature consists of online tributes and interviews with the poet, with barely any scholarly consideration at all. In light of this academic lacuna, I offer a two-fold framework for reading and exploring her poetry. My foci are the expression of Zen Buddhism and feminist concerns in her poetry. These two themes, although apparently widely divergent, intersect in Hirshfield's representation of desire. Desire plays a central role in Zen Buddhism, which theorises it as a central, but problematic, feature of human existence. Desire is problematic because it traps the desiring subject in sensory reality, which is, by its nature, always-already contingent. Feminist thinking also foregrounds desire, insisting on women as desiring subjects, and on the complexity of the desiring relation, imbued as it is with overtones of power and domination. My paper explores the representation of desire and relations of desire in a selection of Hirshfield's poems, demonstrating the centrality and relevance of my twin foci. I offer these here as preliminary tools for reading Hirshfield's poetry, in the hope of stimulating further research into this compelling poet.