When comparing the two poems that make up ‘Father and Child’ by Gwen Harwood, we discover that they portray the changing perspectives and understandings of a young girl whose life is represented by the two poems, ‘Barn Owl’ and ‘Nightfall’. The structure of the poem ‘Father and Child’ represents a passing of time and changing and maturing understanding of death. The graphic imagery used in the poem and the use of aural metaphors, add to the overall appeal of the poem.

‘Barn Owl’, the first part of the poem; begins the journey of understanding for the young child, depicting a graphic lesson of life and death learned. The use of the metaphor “Master of life and death, a wisp haired judge…” illustrates the power the child holds in her hands, in the form of a gun. The scenario depicted in the poem takes place outside the supervision of the child’s father, she says "Let him dream of a child obedient, angel-mild- old no-sayer, robbed of power by sleep" which in the poem represents the child who is beginning to resent the control of the father and her desire to act as an individual, free from his authority. The child aims for the owl and shoots it, and as a result the child’s perception of death dramatically changes from “...clean and final…” To, through the use of graphic imagery and alliteration depicts death, rather, as a tragedy of prolonged pain and suffering. The poet has achieved this by the use of a long and evocative description of death. This description is interrupted by the phrase “I saw those eyes that did not see, mirror my cruelty” this represents the child’s loss of innocence, the realisation of the malice of her action. This is further reinforced in the last stanza where the child finally comprehends that as a result of her actions, her life has changed, the little child still inside her weeps upon her fathers arm “for what I have become” but also comes to the realisation that she will never be the same again as a result of her actions.

The father, authority figure only speaks once in the poem; “End what you have begun.” This changes the child’s understanding of the responsibilities associated with power and the consequences of the misuse of this power.

The second part of the poem “Nightfall” continues the story of the child forty years from ‘Barn Owl’ and is written in the form of an ode. The poem represents death closing in on the father, and the limitations of time (death) on their relationship that was never experienced before in her younger years. The father, who in the first poem is depicted as an “old no-sayer”, is now held in high esteem, he is admired and respected as an “old king”. The extended metaphor “Since there is no more to taste ripeness is plainly all. Father we pick our last fruits of the temporal.” Appeals to our senses and is known an aural metaphor, it illustrates the fathers life becoming fulfilled or ripe, it has come near to its end and the father and child will now spend or pick the last moments of the fathers life together. Over time her
appreciation of her father has changed, this is shown through "Who can be what you were?" and "Old King, your marvellous journey’s done." She has realised the valuable life her father has lead and the great loss that will be felt after he is gone. The Child, now a grown woman learns another lesson about death, it can be quiet and peaceful, “Your night and day are one” suggests that death can be as simple as going to sleep and never waking up.

The poem ‘Father and Child’ represents the changes people experience over time, and the maturity and experiences that shape and change our understanding of life. Through the study of this poem much is to be learnt about changing self and growth of self. This can include emotional and physical growth, as in many ways they go hand in hand.