 Father and Child by Gwen Harwood with Comments

Part 1: Barn Owl

Daybreak: the household slept.

I rose, blessed by the sun.

A horny fiend1, I crept

out with my father's gun.

Let him dream of a child obedient, **angel-mind**-

**old no-sayer**2, robbed of power

by sleep. I knew my prize

who swooped home at this hour

with day-light riddled3 eyes

to his place on a high beam

in our old stables, **to dream**

**light's useless time away4**.

I stood, holding my

breath, in urine-scented hay,

master of life and death,

a wisp-haired judge whose law

would punish beak and claw5.

My first shot struck. He swayed,

ruined, beating his only

wing, as I watched, afraid

by the fallen gun, a lonely

child who believed death clean

and final, not this obscene7

bundle of stuff that dropped,

and dribbled8 through the loose straw

tangling in bowels, and hopped

blindly closer9. I saw

those eyes that did not see

mirror my cruelty

while the wrecked thing10 that could

not bear the light nor hideComments:

1. 1st person, child's perspective.

Religious allusion & contrast - "blesses" yet a "horny fiend"

1. Religious allusion - contrasts persona with father's "dream" of an ideal child.

Imagery - of father's likely reaction

1. Visual imagery - owl as a "prize", objectified

Metaphor - eyes confused by daylight/ also foreshadows ending.

Also begins motif of eyes/blindness which is symbolic throughout the poem.

1. Enjambment - of stanzas.

Irony - light is only "Useless" to an owl

1. Olfactory imagery - evokes smell of the barn

Hyperbole - shows how powerful the persona felt.

Metaphor - child as the "judge"/"law"

1. Sibilance - emphasizes the sound of the shot.

Visual imagery - of owl's distress

Contrast & change of tone - child's reaction

1. Moment of realisation & regret.

Rhyme of "clean" vs "obscene" juxtaposes these ideas.

Visual imagery - contrasts with earlier vision of owl as a "prize", still an object

hobbled in its own blood10.

My father reached my side,

gave me the fallen gun.

'End what you have begun11.

I fired. The blank eyes shone

once into mine, and slept12.

I leaned my head upon

my father's arm, and wept,

owl blind in early sun

for what I had begun13.

1. Alliteration – for visual impact
2. Visual imagery - contrasts with earlier vision of owl as a "prize", still an object.

Metaphor - child sees her cruelty in the owl's eyes.

1. Visual imagery - owl still an object

Visual Imagery – creates pity

1. Direct speech - stark instruction. Father intends to make child bear the responsibility for what they have done. Harsh reality for a child.
2. Euphemism - death is more peaceful than its previous pain
3. Metaphor - compares child to the owl. Both unable to see (in the child's case - see the consequences of their actions & at the end, unable to see past the tears)

Part 2: Nightfall

Forty years, lived or dreamed:

what memories pack them home1.

[Now the season that seemed](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes+3&version=KJV)

[incredible is come](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes+3&version=KJV)[2](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes+3&version=KJV).

Father and child, we stand

in time's long-promised land3.

Since there's no more to taste

ripeness is plainly all.

Father, we pick our last

fruits of the temporal4.

Eighty years old5, you take

this late walk for my sake.

Who can be what you were6?

Link your dry hand in mine,

my stick-thin comforter7.

Far distant suburbs shine

with great simplicities8.

Birds crown in flowering trees,

sunset exalts its known

symbols of transience9.

Your passionate face is grown

to ancient innocence10.

Let us walk for this hour

as if death had no power11

or were no more than sleep.

Things truly named can never

vanish from earth. You keep

a child's delight12 for ever

in birds, flowers, shivery-grass -

I name them as we pass.

"Be your tears wet?" You speak

as if air touched a string

near breaking point13. Your cheek

brushes on mine. Old king,

your marvellous journey's14 done.

Your night and day are one

as you find with your white stick

Comments:

1. Metaphor - contrast to Barn Owl, set in the early morning- here the father is close to death.

Child is now 40

1. Religious allusion Ecclesiastes 3 – shows the realisation that the father is close to death

Begins imagery of harvest.

1. Metaphor & religious imagery – death
2. Metaphor of harvest & religious imagery
3. Fathers age
4. Rhetorical question - no-one can take father's place.
5. Metaphor - although the child is now leading the father thy still see him as a "comforter". He is very thin.
6. Sibilance
7. Sibilance & symbolism - sunset symbolic of ending and time passing
8. Visual imagery and irony - as he ages he looks more innocent/childlike
9. Inclusive language - shows wish to deny death

Sad tone

1. Extends idea that he still holds some childlike qualities
2. Auditory imagery - of his voice
3. Allusion to "King Lear" by Shakespeare

Metaphor for life

1. Symbolism - "white stick" is a cane used by blind people - father is blind enough that he can no longer distinguish night and day.
2. Persona (his child) refers to themself in 3rd person - listing things they have learned about themself & life
3. Allusion to ‘Barn Owl’

the path15 on which you turn

home with the child16 once quick

to mischief17, grown to learn

what sorrows, in the end,

no words, no tears can mend18.

1. Realisation of what impact his death will have.