Death is the only certainty in life and time acts as the instigator, slowly taking moments of an individual’s experience. In the poems Father and Child, Mother Who Gave Me Life and The Violets by Gwen Harwood, the poet explores the idea of death as only a physical disconnection. Harwood places greater emphasis on the spiritual connection that can be attained through memories, because memories triumph over death and time. Her poetry continues to engage readers through its poetic treatment of common human experiences.

Gwen Harwood’s narrative poem Father and Child portrays the changing perspectives and understandings of a young girl through her loss of innocence. Her life is represented by the two poems, ‘Barn Owl’ and ‘Nightfall’ which use memories to convey the changes forty years can has on an individual’s perception of life and death. The poem begins with Barn Owl as Harwood explores the loss of innocence of a child through their knowledge of death. Harwood, as a child, presents herself as innocent but demonstrates a child’s yearning to venture beyond the boundaries of innocence, stating "let him dream of a child obedient, angel mind". Thus, she takes her father's gun, aiming for the "prize... with daylight riddled eyes". The image of the owl not only symbolises wisdom but beauty of the earth, and by shooting it, she takes away this beauty, and the innocence she once held. Evidently, her perception of death, “a lonely child who believed death clean”, illustrates that she never truly understood the consequences of her actions. The graphic imagery of “a bundle of stuff... dribbled through straw” symbolises that pain and suffering is often worse than death, with her father stating with assertion, "end what you've begun". His imperative tone emphasises the lesson he teaches his daughter and thus demonstrates her loss of innocence through her knowledge and experience of death. She ends the poem being "owl blind", metaphorically alluding to King Lear. In order come to realise what her actions have caused, she needed to be blinded and consequently, she was able to fully understand what death truly is.

Nightfall is a continuation of Barn Owl, but the child she once was has now matured. The metaphor of "there's no more to taste, ripeness is plainly all" shows the author's acceptance of the continuation and cycle of life as she understands that death will come when its ready. "Be you tears wet? You speak?" is a direct quote from King Lear to demonstrate that her father does not want her to be saddened by his death but to be comforted by the memories they shared. The poem ends as she learns and accepts the realities of life. "The child once quick to mischief... grown to learn what sorrows in the end, no words, no tears can mend", alludes back to Barn Owl as she reminisces on her childhood to emphasise that she has grown to realise that death may end life, but memories transcend time to create a sense of continuation and connection between individuals.

Memories create a connection between life and death, allowing individuals to be consoled in times of loss. Harwood's elegy "Mother Who Gave Me Life", creates a sense of reverence for mothers who have continued the cycle of life. As Harwood experiences the death of her mother, she relives the moments when her mother was alive, coming to the realization that a mother's role is never ending. "it is not for my children I walk on earth in the life of the living". The spiritual undertone asserts that essentially, mother acts as the nurturer and giver of life. Such a role has been given to women since the beginning of time, allowing individuals to understand that a mother’s role transcends time, even though death is inevitable. This is evident as Harwood goes back to the beginning of time, stating, "heads inclining to monkey bosom". By using monkeys, she creates an image of the evolution of human beings where from the very beginning of time, a mother has continued to play her role to care and bring children into the world. Harwood’s implied comparison of “Halley’s Comet” and “a little towel” signifies that although the towel is so simple, it is symbolically intricate and complex, emphasizing how profound a mother’s impact truly is. She extends this motif in “a fabric of marvels/folded down to a little space” dignifying and acknowledging that the love of a mother is intertwined with her family.
The gratitude she gives to her mother emphasizes the significance her mother continues to have in her life. “You left the world so, having lived nearly thirty thousand days”. By accounting for each day of her mother’s life, Harwood stresses that a mother never stops being a mother and though death is a natural part of the natural cycle of life, the memory of a mother is everlasting. “At our last meeting I closed the ward of heavy glass between us”. The heavy glass symbolizes that the barrier between life and death is only a transparent door and memories acts as the key to unlock it. Harwood also shows that the beauty of memory is that individuals can look back on their lives whilst remaining in the future, highlighting the significance of spiritual connections. Her vivid memory of her mother final moments, “Your face crumples, fine threadbare linen worn, still good to the last”, continues the motif of linen. Though her mother is in her final days, she endures the pain and remains a mother until the very end. She ends the poem, signalling her mother’s death, but with a sense of reverence as she holds onto the memories that keep her mother alive. The continuum of the biblical allusion, “Darkness falls on my father’s house”, represents that though she has lost a physical connection, a spiritual one continues to exist. Through her poetry, Harwood evidently consoles readers in times of loss.

Time acts as the villain in life; taking away moments people often wish would last forever. In the Violets, Harwood explores the common human experiences of love and innocence as she recalls a moment of childhood, gone because of time, through the recurring motif of the violet. The poem begins in the present tense, “It is dusk… I kneel to pick frail melancholy flowers among ashes and loam”. Her prayer like manner and the frail nature of the violets reflects the fragility of memories as Harwood tries to relive her childhood by grasping hold of a flower. The violets symbolise transience of childhood, innocence and life and loam acts as a juxtaposing symbol of life and growth. By personifying the violets, Harwood stresses the fact that memories are alive and continue to transcend time. The enjambment of the stanzas creates a sense of continuity and link between the past and present that cannot be taken by time, as a result of memories. As Harwood remembers waking at night, wondering, “where’s morning gone?”, she uses “morning” to symbolise a time of joy and innocence. The rhetoric, directed at time, also reflects the difficult questions in life as there comes a time where individuals begin to question the purpose of their existence on earth. The continued motif of the spring violets, “She… carried me downstairs to see spring violets”, brings Harwood to the realisation that they, like time, will not be there forever.

Evidently, her only enemy was time, for it is time that has taken away her childhood. “While I slept, has stolen from me those hours of unreturning light”. The unreturning light creates an image of darkness of the loss that comes from time and so Harwood enters her “father’s house”, a symbol of eternal life, where not even time can take effect on their lives. The isolation of “years cannot move”, and her tone of affirmation, emphasises that time only holds the power if you allow it. While it may take people away from a person’s life, it cannot take away the memories that they hold. Harwood continues this idea through the metaphor of “nor death’s disorienting scale distort those lamp lit presences”, which not only highlights the cruelty of death, but demonstrates that memories are an eternal quality with the power to conquer it. The poem ends symbolically as Harwood states, “faint scent of violets drifts in air” to show that though time has passed, the moment still exists through memories.

The memories individuals’ carry throughout their lives often brings back moments of joy and happiness, which has been physically taken by time. In Father and Child, Mother Who Gave Me Life and The Violets Harwood’s poetry continues to engage readers though its poetic treatment of common human experiences. She stresses the importance of spiritual connections in life, consoling readers in times of loss and pain.