Controversial Themes Displayed In Gwen Harwood's Poetry

Gwen Harwood explores many ideas in her poetry that were influenced by her upbringing and societal views. Harwood is an Australian poet born in 1920, who published over 420 works including poems and librettos. She grew up in a family of strong women, her mother who was a feminist and was involved in being an actrivist for issues in the community and her grandmother earned her own living up until she was 80. At the time this took a very strong woman because at the time they were living in a Patriarchal society. This means that men held primary power in roles of leadership and had social privilege over women. She also grew up in a family who was strongly influenced by their religion. Harwoods upbringing, family and societal views of the time majorly influenced the central concerns throughout Gwen Harwood's poetry. Many of these concerns relate to growing up, loss of innocence, the creative role of the female, the feminine and the mother, as well as the significance of the passing of time. Thus Harwoods poetry is relevant to modern audiences as life could be concerned with the themes above and they have the power to speak to others who are going through similar experiences.

One of Harwoods most famous poems In The Park published in 1961 uncovers concerns based on motherhood and the feminine. A major tone throughout this poem is pessimistic to show that when you are a mother you make countless sacrifices such as your identity being changed compared to the identity she had in society prior to having children. Harwood looks upon motherhood in negative light which may be considered taboo as no one talks about the negative aspects of family and motherhood. During the time this was written every woman was expected to have children and dedicate their lives to taking care of the household. Harwoods view on a woman's role in society is juxtaposed with majority of the worlds view. The poem demonstrates a mothers change in identity in the line, “Her clothes are out of date.” This displays that the mother's life is all about the children and that she has no time to care about her own appearance. The use of the poetic device irony is very powerful throughout this poem. For example when the mother says, “it's so sweet to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,” after she said this she thinks to herself, “They have eaten me alive”. This quote also has the use of hyperbole, as she has exaggerated the effect of having children has done to her. These poetic devices have accentuated the theme and the core message behind the poem. The core message in this poem is still discussed in society today as women can sometimes face the same issues.

Barn Owl written by Gwen Harwood in 1969 demonstrates important themes including, loss of innocence and morality. The poem tells a story of a young child who shows rebellion towards her father as she transforms from an innocent girl into a girl with adult knowledge after she shoots an owl. The poem is written in first person as it is from a young girls point of view. This is shown throughout as some wording is deliberately brief and is low modality language to emphasise the child's inability to comprehend this is shown in the use of the word, “stuff.” There are many poetic devices being used to portray the theme of loss of innocence. The mood at the start is completely different to the mood towards the end. In the beginning there was a sense of anticipation and excitement however after the owl is shot the mood quickly turned into a quiet and serene tone. This demonstrates the child naivety being replaced with guilt. In stanza three the owl is shot, Harwood uses a short sentence when saying, “the first shot struck.” This

is used to create tension and make you take a moment to think about what has happened. At the end of the poem Harwood employs a metaphor 'owl blind' to convey their sadness, for what they have begun is the journey to maturity. Harwood also used a lot of religious imagery. This is displayed in the use of the words, “blessed by the sun” and angle-mind. These poetic devices helped create tension and show the real emotions of the child. This poem is relevant to modern audiences as people others may go through a time where they develop an adult understanding suddenly.

Overall, it may be said that Gwen Harwood's poetry displays many controversial themes. These were influenced by what was going on in society during Harwoods upbringing, however are still discussed today. These big ideas include, motherhood and the loss of innocence. Barn Owl and In The Park both demonstrate a family figure as Harwood grew up being very family orientated. In The Park explores a mother and their important role whilst uncovering deep truths that are not usually brought to light. In Barn Owl, Harwood demonstrates a time where she uncovered an understanding of the consequences of rebelling seen through the ugliness of death. Gwen Harwood's poetry have great power to still be relevant in today's society as she explores worldwide such as women being somewhat “less” than men. These memories and experiences have become a kind of consolation that now can give meaning to the present.