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Growing Up in Richard Wilbur's "The Writer"

Richard Wilbur's "The Writer" speaks about a child, possibly a teenager, writing a story, but really has more to do with the child coming of age and spreading her wings. The poem suggests that the speaker wants the best for the child when it is time for the child to "leave the nest." The speaker wants to protect the child, but knows that it is time for the child to grow up and fend for herself. The poem appears to be simple and straight-forward, by developing certain elements to help support the speaker describe the atmosphere. The speaker uses elements such as language, setting, theme, image and unusual word choices to help us understand the poem better.

When you read the poem, you can tell that the speaker is an adult, possibly the parent, speaking of the child, and what the child is doing. The speaker describes what the child is doing in her room. "My daughter is writing a story." (line 3) You can tell she is not writing a story on paper because the speaker talks about hearing a typewriter. At the same time that the speaker is talking about what the child is doing, you read how the speaker remembers an incident in that very same room where a bird gets caught. When reading about the story of the helpless bird, "...dazed starling Which was trapped in that very room..." (lines 16 and 17), she compares how the bird felt being trapped, and how the child might feel growing up, feeling trapped in the room.

You can understand from reading the poem that the speaker does not use simple language. The speaker uses a combination of single and multiple syllable words. The speaker does use metaphor and simile within the poem, suggesting that the speaker is an adult. "From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys Like a chain hauled over a gunwale." (lines 5 and 6)

These lines describe how the child is seated when using the typewriter. You can also tell from the writing of the poem that it was written in the early 20th century. The speaker does not give a precise date, but allows us to understand a time-frame given because the child is using a typewriter. The use of a typewriter would not have been used prior to 1875, when the first typewriters were created. When using metaphor, the speaker talks about "... the stuff Of her life is a great cargo..." (lines 7 and 8) where her life is a heavy weight that she must carry with her through her passage of life. At that time, many people were traveling on board ships. This was also the great time of immigrants coming to the United States. You would have seen many people carrying their lives in trunks, which would have been very heavy.

The poem also allows us to use our senses to see, hear, and feel the activities. You can see where the child is sitting in her room, near a window. "Where light breaks..." (line 2) You can see the light shining into her room. You can visualize yourself looking through the crack of the door, watching the bird try to escape. "And wait then, humped and bloody," (line 25) With this line, you can see how injured the bird has become, and you can see the blood on the bird. Simile is also used in the description of the bird. "... drop like a glove" (line 23) You can see the bird fall to the floor, but at the same time, can feel the weight of the bird as it falls, comparing the action of the fall like a falling glove. Image is very important to make this a good poem.

With image, the speaker also uses unusual word choices that might not be used everyday. Words like, "prow" (line 1), "linden" (line2), "affright" (line 19), and "starling" (line 16) are all words that someone with some type of education would use. When the speaker used the word affright, another word choice could have been scare. Another way to write the first line could have been, "In her room at the front of the house" instead of "prow of the house". These words

are not used in ordinary speaking in today's society, but may have been used more often during the time the speaker wrote this poem.

In the end, the speaker comes back to the child. The theme of this poem definitely describes a child "coming of age." When talking about the child, then the starling, there is a connection between the two. Knowing that there will be very hard times and very good times for the child, the parent wants the child to know that even with good times and bad, the child will grow up and be all right. Remembering back to the starling, the parent wanted so much to help the bird, but could not. Even though the bird had bad times, it was able to find its way and make it out of the room. The parent wants the child to survive like the bird. No matter how bad it gets, the child will be able to make her way and survive. The parent wants the child to spread her wings and fly like the bird.

The Writer

by Richard Wilbur

In her room at the prow of the house
 Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,
 My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
 From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys 5
 Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff
 Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
 I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses, 10
 As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
 A stillness greatens, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,
 And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
 Of strokes, and again is silent. 15

I remember the dazed starling
 Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;
 How we stole in, lifted a sash

And retreated, not to affright it;
 And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door, 20
 We watched the sleek, wild, dark

And iridescent creature
 Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
 To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody, 25
 For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
 Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,
 Beating a smooth course for the right window
 And clearing the sill of the world. 30

It is always a matter, my darling,
 Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
 What I wished you before, but harder.