

## Analysis of the Poem "The Writer" by Richard Wilbur

Richard Wilbur was a poet whose works were elegant yet witty and paradoxical. He was the second poet laureate of the United States, and he won the Pulitzer Prize for his collection *Things of This World: Poems* in 1957, and then won another Pulitzer prize for *New and Collected Poems*. His poetry collections have won countless other prizes, honors, and fellowships; it is safe to say that his poetry is highly regarded by almost all who read them. Wilbur's grandfather and great-grandfather were both editors, and he was a writer early on. As a soldier in WWII, he wrote much, but turned to poetry to organize his thoughts and the world, and his focus on patterns and order at first hindered his ability to really channel emotions in his writing.

In his poems, Richard Wilbur displays and considers some beliefs that were challenged by WWII, such as the power of love over hate, the wisdom and comfort of nature, and the creative and peaceful nature of man. Even though he could not reconcile his ideals and his reality in his mind, Wilbur still wrote poems because of the energy that was organized into shapes and patterns. As a result, his poetry is very reflective, emotionally controlled, and optimistic.

### Richard Wilbur and A Summary of The Writer

*The Writer* is Richard Wilbur's metaphorical exploration of what it is to be a writer, of the challenge a writer faces, especially when that writer is a family member, a daughter.

The poem takes the reader directly into a house and from there the scene is set, described by a first person speaker who is on the stairs listening to his daughter typing.

- The first line of the poem is the foundation for the extended metaphor. That word *pro* means the front part of a ship, pointed, above water. So the house is a boat sailing through life.
- More words associated with sailing vessels follow, deepening/extending the metaphor - look out for chain, gunwale, cargo, passage - all relate to the journey through the sea of life.

Note also:

- Stanzas 1 - 5 focus on the daughter and her writing in the present time.
- Stanzas 6 - 10 concentrate on a wild bird, a starling, used as a symbol for the writing career of the daughter. This is a memory so is in the past.
- Stanza 11, the last, is a personal summing up of what it takes to be a writer and how the process can feel like life or death. There's a return to the present again.

Richard Wilbur is well known for his technical mastery, breadth of language and formal approach within his poetry. Many of his poems use a range of full rhyme and set rhythms within tight structures.

- This poem is a bit different because it is in free verse; there is no rhyme scheme and the meter (metre in British English) is also varied.

It was first published in 1976 in the book *The Mind Reader*.

## Analysis of The Writer Stanza by Stanza

*The Writer* is a simple poem on the surface - a father listens to his daughter typing away in her room and wishes her good luck. Yet, as with most of Wilbur's work, a closer look at the poetic devices and language he employs to convey feeling will reveal so much more.

### Stanza 1

The first line is an anapaestic gem...*In her...at the ...of the...* bringing a gentle rising rhythm to proceedings. And that all important word *prow* hints strongly at the metaphor. The prow is the front of a boat and cuts through the water. Here is a house about to embark on a long journey through the seas of life.

The speaker (the father and no doubt, Wilbur himself) knows the room intimately. He knows about the light and the way the trees, linden (lime), move in the window space as his daughter writes inside.

This stanza's structure, three lines, the longer middle line sandwiched between two shorter, sets the pattern for the rest of the poem.

## Stanza 2

The first person speaker, in the stairwell, pauses to listen as his daughter taps away on the typewriter. Her room door is shut because she doesn't want to be disturbed. Writing is a solo task. Not many can write in a noisy social atmosphere.

Note the enjambment of both lines giving the idea of flow as the writer busies herself.

- The metaphor continues with that phrase *Like a chain hauled over a gunwale*, a simile, comparing the sound of the typewriter keys to that of a chain catching on the upper side of a boat. The chain suggests heaviness, heavy links, perhaps used to tie down cargo, or keep the vessel anchored.
- Is this the vessel weighing anchor, that is, lifting anchor, leaving the port for the high seas?

## Stanza 3

The metaphor stretches on. This time the word *cargo* immediately brings to mind a fully laden boat. His daughter may be young but because she has chosen to write her life is deemed already to be substantial.

We don't get to learn of the specifics but it is clear from the language that she'll need some luck to get through. That word *passage* is again related to (sea) travel and means to get from one place to another...to have a safe passage through.

## Stanza 4

Then the typing stops, leaving a sort of vacuum in the house. The speaker suggests it could be the daughter's response to his own thoughts - he has too easily wished her luck and worked things out which isn't really worth that much - the young generation's response to adult thinking.

This is a pause, a silence that *greatens* - increases, deepens - and pervades the whole house.

Stanza by Stanza Analysis of The Writer

## Stanza 5

The speaker is thinking about his daughter and her life which is already carrying a heavy load, what with the writing and all. Now, because of the pause in typing, the house seems to be weighing up the situation.

But before it has time to conclude she resumes her typing, her thoughts begin to flow or at least stutter. On and off. The sound of keys being worked then silence as the daughter readjusts her thoughts and words.

This is very much the world of the writer. Thoughts quickly turn into typed words which flow quickly and thickly but then just as suddenly as they start they stop.

### **Stanza 6**

As the speaker listens he recalls an event from the past which parallels the daughter's writing career.

It's a story of entrapment. A wild bird somehow got into the room and had to be helped out.

### **Stanza 7**

Enjambment between stanzas continues the story. Both father and daughter were involved. They had to be careful as they didn't want to scare the bird, so all they could do was make sure a window was at least open then sit back, watch, and hope the bird could figure things out.

There's a repeated *And retreated/And how...* which reinforces the sense of waiting.

### **Stanza 8**

The bird, a starling, has special plumage which is iridescent (changes color depending on the angle of the viewer) and as it tries to escape the two watchers note this.

It flies again and again into the window (*the brilliance...* that is, the light through the glass) but fails, dropping *like a glove* in a heap.

### **Stanza 9**

The couple are there for an hour unable to do anything, watching this poor bird miss its opportunity...until...it somehow manages to gather itself together and muster one great effort, much to the relief and delight of father and daughter.

### **Stanza 10**

The starling escapes *clearing the sill of the world* so described because it is now free to fly where it will.

This final act sums up the work of the writer too, who has to try again and again to attain freedom and get the words to fly. It can be a life's task, it can seem an impossible mission; there are at times obstacles seemingly insurmountable.

But, keep banging your head against a wall until that day, that one time, when rejection ends and the writer flies through an open window that was there just waiting, all the time!

### **Stanza 11**

The speaker comes back to the present and rhetorically speaks to the daughter. Being a writer, getting thoughts out onto the page, onto the screen, can be harrowing. One day the words come flying free, other days they can't get off the ground, they're blocked by something.

The speaker knows this from experience so wishes greater luck to his daughter. Luck is dependent on fate and coincidence. Some think we make our own, others believe it's a question of *Que sera, sera*....

## **The Writer - Brief Analysis of Meter**

*The Writer* is a free verse poem of 11 stanzas, each with three lines (a tercet) making 33 lines in total.

There is no set rhyme scheme and the meter (metre in British English) varies throughout. Here are some sample lines to give an overall feel for the rhythmic stresses:

*In her **room** / at the **prow** / of the **house***

This first line is unusual because it has three anapaestic feet...dada**DUM** dada**DUM** dada**DUM** ...which could be an echo of the rhythmic taps of the typewriter. It is a rising beat..perhaps the speaker is going up the stairs?

Naturally this anapaestic rhythm cannot carry on throughout the poem or it would turn into a farce, so there are metric variations. This helps change the pace, emphasis and rhythms, and alters the flow as the reader moves from line to line.

This is all wrapped up in the word syntax, the way grammar and clauses work together to either simplify the journey through the poem or make more complex.

***Young as / she is, / the stuff***

*Of her **life** / is a / **great cargo**, / and **some** / of it / **heavy**:*

This is the start of the third stanza. A trochee opens - **DUM**da - stress on the first word to give more emphasis. Two iambic feet follow.

The enjambment runs on into the next line which is a hexameter fourteen syllables long which is sufficient for the load. So there's an anapaest, a pyrrhic, a spondee (**DUMDUM**) an iamb, another pyrrhic and a final trochee. This is a real mix, the great cargo relating to the burden the daughter carries if she wants to be a writer.

## **What Are The Literary Devices Used in The Writer?**

### **Alliteration**

When two or more words are close together in a line and start with the same consonant they are said to be alliterative. This brings added interest to the soundscape:

*helpless hour*

*We watched the sleek, wild*

*Batter against the brilliance*

*I wish/What I wished*

## Assonance

When two or more close words in a line have similar sounding vowels:

*prow of the house*  
*windows are tossed with linden*  
*stillness greatens, in which*  
*trapped in that*

## Caesura

This is a break or pause in a line, often or near midway, through punctuation. Here are two different examples:

*Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,*  
*For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits*

## Enjambment

When a line runs on into the next line or stanza without punctuation, maintaining the sense. For example:

*In her room at the prow of the house*  
*Where light breaks,*  
*A stillness greatens, in which*  
*The whole house seems to be thinking,*

## Metaphor

The extended metaphor - the house as a boat sailing through life - is used.

## Simile

Comparison of one thing with another often using the words like or as. For example:

*drop like a glove*

*To the hard floor, or desk-top,*

### Logline

"The Writer" is a touching exploration of a successful writer coming to understand his young daughter's struggles to become a writer, and his helplessness in guiding her.

### Tone:

The **tone** of the poem is serious and sentimental but also celebratory of growing up and writing. The poem has all 3 line stanzas. The lines are uneven with no structured pattern. They are pretty short and enjambed which keeps the poem flowing.

### Speaker:

In poetry, the **speaker** is the voice behind the poem—the person we imagine to be saying the thing out loud. It's important to note that the **speaker** is not the poet. Even if the poem is biographical, you should treat the **speaker** as a fictional creation because the **writer** is choosing what to say about himself.

### Voice:

The speaker in the poem is a father and writer speaking about his daughter who is also writing.

### Tone:

**The father's tone is one of compassion and empathy. He understands and shares the feelings of his daughter.**

### Brief Analysis:

"The Writer" is a narrative told by a father who watches his daughter as she works on stories in her room. It seems to have been written for her and for all young people who are having trouble finding their place in the world. It is set in their house where a young girl is working on something that is of the utmost importance to her, and because it is important to her it should be important to her parents as well. That is why in this poem, along with speaking to youth, it reminds adults about the feelings of young people and how they must respect



even what does not seem important because “it is always a matter... of life or death” (31-32).

The symbol of the starling is crucial to the understanding of “The Writer”. The poem explains that at one time there was a bird stuck in their house and they opened a window in the room so that it could get out. It had to do that on its own, however. The other people could not help it out even though it was hurt and frightened along the way. This is exactly what parents have to do for their children who may be lost or scared; they have to give them an opening and wait for the children to find their own directions in the world. It is even deeper in this poem because typing on the typewriter is a similar noise to a bird pecking at a window to get out.

There is also the symbol of the ship to take into account, and I believe that this one is even broader than the starling. Her life is a ship that will take her on a journey through the world. It is up to her to maneuver and take care of it in any way she sees fit, and all her father can do is “wish her a lucky passage” (9). To add to the ship and sea symbol, the poem itself takes on that kind of a shape. Each line is like a wave that goes up and down, or like the tide that comes in and out in a specific rhythm that is always generally the same, but at the same time a little different.

In the interview with Richard Wilbur, he reveals that both of the major events of this poem occurred: his daughter used to write in the same room where a starling was trapped. He put these two ideas together to create such a vivid metaphor and, although it was written with his daughter in mind, is not specifically for her. Wilbur wants his poetry to be a “machine of feeling that other people can use” and because of this he made “The Writer” more general so that it would apply to a larger audience beyond his daughter.

### **Who wrote "The Writer"?**

Richard Wilbur

### **Why is the poem in blank verse even though there is no rhyme and meter?**

structure is constant (all stanzas are tercets)

### **What is a prow?**

front of a ship

### **What is a gunwale?**

side of ship

**What does he mean by the stuff of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy?**

life sucks sometimes, and there are some serious issues everyone goes through

**When the daughter pauses, what is she experiencing?**

writer's block

**What stops the dad from going and helping his daughter?**

he remembers the story of the starling

**What is the story of the starling?**

Two years ago there was a starling who got trapped inside the room the daughter was in now. The only thing they did was open the curtain. They retreated to not frighten it. It failed at getting out and almost died from hitting the wall, but then in the end it "cleared the sill of the world"

**How did the flashback change the dad's decision on helping his daughter?**

he decided to try and let her figure it out by herself

**What is the significance of the rhyme between starling and darling?**

He tells his daughter "it is always a matter, my darling, of life or death". The starling almost died, but made it out okay. He is now using the story of the starling to tell his daughter that she will have difficulties but she will always make it out okay.