

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 poem 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 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.

