An Analysis of Richard Wilbur’s “The Writer”

Sidney Sheldon said, “A blank piece of paper is God’s way of telling us how hard it is to be God.” In “The Writer,” Richard Wilbur describes a father listening to his daughter write a story on her typewriter. Wilbur’s two images, one of his daughter steering her small ship of experience and the other of a trapped bird trying desperately to escape, illustrate the situation of the writer and his message: Having a story is the culmination of tough experiences; producing a story is an act of desperate struggle.

The structure of Wilbur’s poem illustrates the divinity of the creative process. His daughter’s message is truly a product of her creation. Each stanza is three lines long; the poem totals thirty three lines. Symbolically, the number three suggests the Trinity; the number thirty three suggests Christ’s age at the height of his ministry. These images parallel the daughter’s role as creator and her struggle to create her message.

The poem blends two images that serve as metaphors for the writer’s task. Stanzas 1-9 present the daughter as the captain of her ship, sitting “in her room at the prow of the house” (1). The nautical diction builds the image of her journeying process to write her story. Sounds emit from the typewriter “like a chain hauled over a gunwale” (6), she carries her experience like a “great cargo” (8), and the speaker wishes his daughter “a lucky passage” (9). Even her typing suggests the motion of rowing, coming in a “bunched clamor / Of strokes” (14-15). Additionally, the second line of each stanza is longer than the first and third. Visually, this
suggests the rise and fall of the ocean and reinforces the nautical references and the father’s wish for her “lucky passage” (9). The word “lucky” is an interesting choice; it seems trite, as though the father does not yet fully empathize with her plight and cannot until the end of the poem.

The second image, that of the trapped bird, parallels the desperate struggle a writer faces to create a message. The father knows how careful he must be to try to free the bird without harming, or even killing it, a harrowing experience for anyone who has witnessed it. Lines 16-30 concern the trapped “starling” (16) and its struggle to escape the room. Interestingly, the speaker remembers the struggle of “a helpless hour” (20) in one long compound-complex sentence. At the beginning, the speaker presents the nautical images in five shorter sentences; they are simply him talking about his daughter. The focus changes after line fifteen, and the bird’s struggle, and symbolically the writer’s creative process, is complex, drawn-out, and exhausting. This long sentence is not free of its pauses, though. There are fifteen commas and three semi-colons all of which force breaks in the reading and suggest the bird’s interrupted flight. Metaphorically, the interrupted flight then becomes the start-stop-start process of writing and the desperate struggle to articulate experience.

Wilbur’s diction and syntactical structures further his message about the writer’s struggle. Ironically, the complexity of the creative process is juxtaposed against simple subject-verb combinations free of many descriptive adjectives: “I pause” (4), “I remember” (16), “we stole” (18), “we watched” (21), “It lifted” (28), “I wish” (32). Simple words can combine to form sentences, and yet how complex the message is behind them. Most of the adjectives modify the symbol of the writer’s message – the bird. The trapped, “dazed starling” (16) is a “sleek, wild, dark / And iridescent creature” (22), “humped and bloody” (25) from its struggle. Even the onomatopoetic sounds mirror the bird’s struggle: the speaker watches the bird “batter against the
brilliance, drop like a glove / To the hard floor, or the desk-top, / And wait then, humped and bloody” (23-25). The explosive “b,” “d,” and “p” sounds, the harsh “t” and “k” sounds, and the guttural “g” sound imitate the bruised and battered bird’s attempts at flight. Once it finds success, the words are softer and smoother “s” sounds: “our spirits / Rose when, suddenly sure, It lifted … Beating a smooth course for the right window / And clearing the sill of the world” (26-30). Like the trapped bird that eventually finds release, the young girl must experience struggle before she can express her story.

The last three lines serve also to join the two images in the first thirty lines. The father/speaker refers to his daughter with a term of endearment – “darling” (31), which echoes the “starling” he has just described. In the father’s consciousness, he now unifies the “matter…Of life or death” (31-32) of both the bird and his daughter. His trite wish for her “lucky passage” (9) now contains an addendum: “I wish / What I wished you before, but harder” (32-33). He “had forgotten” (32) what it was like to sit as his daughter does and create a message as a novice writer; his “but harder” addendum contains more empathy and reminds us of a child wishing “harder.”

Wilbur’s poem is simple, yet it carries a tone of deep understanding and empathy between the speaker and his daughter about how complex and difficult it is to produce a message. To do so effectively is to become momentarily divine. Writing is born of a creator. How appropriate that Wilbur couches his message about writing in a discovery a creator makes about his creation – the father understands the child. Experience forms a writer; struggle births a message.