

Bridging the gap:
comparing "letters
from my father" and
"the writer"



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The short story "Letters from My Father", written by Robert Olen Butler, and the poem "The Writer", written by Richard Wilbur, both depict family struggles. "Letters from My Father" is about a Vietnamese girl who grew up without a father because of troubles with immigration and when she is finally reunited with her father she debates if he truly loves her. In "The Writer" the narrator is worried about his daughter's depression, but she does not want to talk to him about it because of an inferred weak connection between the two. In "The Writer" and "Letters from My Father" both narrators have a poor connection with an important family member; however, the two try to understand what has happened and want to bridge the gaps in their relationships.

In both accounts, the narrators face an internal issue of where they have let too much come between themselves and a close family member, and they are now wondering whether they should interfere in order to improve their relationships. In "The Writer", the narrator has to decide if he would like to go into his daughter's room when she pauses typing because he never knows the outcome of the pauses. When his daughter types, she is expressing her feelings and thoughts; however, when she stops typing the outcome could be detrimental. The narrator metaphorically uses a bird to represent his daughter and says, "And retreated, to to affright it; And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door, We watched..." (Wilbur 1). He has allowed for his daughter and himself to grow apart, so much as to make him wonder whether or not his daughter would come to him for help. In this moment he wonders if she truly loves him enough to trust him. The narrator, Fran, in "Letters from My Father" has been receiving letters from

her father telling her about how much he loves her, but once they are reunited Fran is not sure if he really does. One day while her father was working she says, " So I've been sitting all morning today in the shack behind our house, out here with the tree roaches and the carpenter ants and the smell of mildew and rotting wood and I am sweating so hard that it's dripping of my nose and chin. There are so many letters in my lap" (Butler 5). Because of their separation in two very distant countries and lack of contact expressing true emotion, the father and daughter's relationship has become almost nonexistent until recently. In this moment Fran wonders if her dad truly loves her; similar to how the narrator of " The Writer" wondered if his daughter really loves him. The pair of stories are similar because the narrators must both face the issue of whether or not they are really loved by a dear family member.

The main difference between " Letters from My Father" and " The Writer" is that Fran realizes her father will always be there for her, while the narrator of the " The Writer" will always have fear of what is going to happen with his daughter. In " The Writer", the narrator is only able to know what is going to happen in the instantaneous moment because of his weak connection with his daughter. The narrator talks of a bird, similar to his daughter, that falls and is able to get up with only a little bit of help. Even though the bird is now free, he does not know if the bird will fall again and no longer be able to fly. Sometimes his daughter pauses and types again, but there is no way for him to know for certain that she will always continue to type. Unlike the central persona of " The Writer", in " Letters from My Father" Fran is confident that her father loves her. After reading through her father's letters in which he

attempts to help her get into the United States of America, she says, "...I know my father will be here soon. The lawn mower is over there in the corner and this morning he got up and said that it was going to be hot today, that there were no clouds in the sky and he was going to have to mow the lawn. When he opens the door, I will let him see me here, and I will ask him to talk to me like in these letters, like when he was so angry with some stranger that he knew what to say" (Butler 5). It is hard for Fran to see that her father loves her, as their connection has weakened over their time apart, but seeing how hard he tried to get her into the country made her realize how much he loves her.

As said by Fran, she now knows that he will always come back and that they can talk. In the end, only the narrator of " Letters From My Father" receives an answer to the two stories' theme of ' they love me, they love me not'. " The Writer" and " Letters From My Father" both share the common question of whether a family member truly loves them, but differentiate because only the narrator in " Letters from My Father" obtains confirmation that her father truly loves her.