

Smooth sailing



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Parents are innately protective of their children. They know that their children will meet struggles in their lives, but at one point the parent must let their child be and simply wish him or “ her a lucky passage.” In “ The Writer” by Richard Wilbur, the speaker is describing his daughter’s experience in writing, which is used as a metaphor for life. His daughter is facing problems and challenges; she is growing up. This is compared to a starling that was trapped in that exact room just two years earlier. The starling, after much effort and fight, was able to break free. The speaker uses the comparison to illustrate the heart-aching reality that eventually, parents must allow their children to fight through life challenges on their own.

The structure and syntax of the poem emphasize the peaks and downfalls of life. There are 11 stanzas, each consisting of 3 lines each. It is important to notice that the second line of each stanza is always its longest. This visually highlights the ups and downs of life. This clearly stresses how the daughter will hit walls, but be “ at it again with a bunched clamor Of strokes” eventually. Furthermore, each stanza except the last consists of one declarative each. However, there are constant pauses with commas, colons, and semi-colons to represent that life is not smooth. The speaker, and father, understands this and realizes he can do nothing more but hope his daughter will be able to battle through it all. Thus, the structure and syntax of the poem itself visually illustrate the daughter’s bumpy road she must face and conquer.

Stanzas 1-5 use nautical imagery to depict writing as a metaphor for sailing through life. The specific terms such as “ prow,” “ gunwale,” “ cargo,” and “

passage” illustrate the daughter’s journey of “ writing a story” as a voyage through life. The daughter is still young, yet already has “ great cargo, and some of it heavy.” Therefore it is significant that the speaker precisely chooses to “ wish her a lucky passage.” The evident empathetic tone shows that the speaker is cognizant that the daughter will inevitably face violent waves throughout her voyage. The daughter “ rejects [the] thought and its easy figure,” showing that the daughter refuses to adhere to the wish and is willing to fight through the struggles of the life she has chosen. This establishes the background for the poem’s message that is in essence summarized in the last stanza.

In stanzas 6-10, the episode of the speaker watching a starling struggle to fly away parallels to how the speaker hopes for the daughter to battle through life and not give up. The speaker recounts the bird “ trapped in that very room, two years ago.” It was specifically the same room. This could parallel to how the speaker is potentially trapping the daughter because the speaker, as a parent, is unable to let go. However the speaker continues to recall “ how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door, [He] watched the sleek, wild, dark / And iridescent creature.” Although the starling “[dropped] like a glove To the hard floor” and by the end was “ humped and bloody,” it was able to finally break free “[clear] the sill of the world.” This idea is concurrent with the speaker’s current situation. The speaker is watching from the outside, helpless and unable to help the daughter.

It is conspicuous that there are parallels between the daughter and the starling that build on the speaker’s release of the daughter into the real world and message of the poem as a whole that is summarized in the last

three lines. Both the starling and the writer have been trapped in the same exact room. After endless struggling, the starling is able to eventually find the right path and “[beat] a smooth course for the right window.” The writer on the other hand is still in the stage of battling. The speaker refers to the starling as what he desires the daughter to accomplish. In both situations, the speaker can just open the window and wish for the best. This comparison reflects the hardship of a parent letting go of his or her daughter. “ My darling” shows intense feelings and love for the daughter. The speaker wishes his daughter luck in life and recounts that “ It is always a matter, ... Of life or death.” He wants his daughter to take life seriously, from the minute details to the life-determining decisions. Most of all, he wants to reiterate his earlier wish – “ I wish What I wished you before, but harder.” This touches on his earlier wish of a “ lucky passage.” The speaker wishes his daughter smooth sailing in the real world.

As indicated by the poem’s syntax and by the extended metaphor of the ship, Wilbur compares the path of a starling to that of a daughter to depict the difficult point at which a parent must let the child experience the ups and downs of the real world and struggle through troubles on his or her own. In growing up, it is imperative that the daughter struggle through sweat, blood, and tears to break through challenges. Wilbur clearly shows how a parent can only hope that a child will learn how to hold up the waves and successfully navigate his or her way through life on his or her own. Thus, the poem relays the message that life will present challenges, but that struggling through is undeniably a part of life.