

# [Irony and interpretation in wilbur’s "boy at the window”](https://assignbuster.com/irony-and-interpretation-in-wilburs-boy-at-the-window/)

Richard Wilbur’s poem “ Boy at the Window” describes a young boy looking at the snowman he has built outside his window at twilight. Noting the cold outdoor environment in which his snowman must spend the night, the boy weeps; however, the poem reveals that the snowman’s own reaction to his environment is quite different. As this discrepancy is the central tension driving the poem, one might assert that “ Boy at the Window” is a poem about interpretation and misinterpretation. Though the reader expects the boy, as a rational, thinking human, to formulate an accurate understanding of the snowman, it is ironically the snowman that has the more astute powers of observation. The poem’s structure, with its two parallel stanzas, evokes the binary oppositions on which “ Boy at the Window” functions; the most important of these binaries is the human/inhuman hierarchy, which Wilbur subverts by privileging the snowman’s viewpoint over the boy’s. Ultimately, as the title of the poem reveals, the poem hinges on the snowman’s interpretation of the boy he sees at the window, rather than the boy’s perception of the snowman. In many ways, Wilbur initially parallels the boy and the snowman. The image of the boy and the personified snowman facing and examining each other through the window indicates that they might be read almost as mirror images of one another. Additionally, both the boy and the snowman perform the same actions in the poem: they “ see” one another (1, 11), and they both weep for the other’s condition. The simultaneous weeping also suggests that the boy and the snowman feel an empathetic connection for one another; in the shortest sentence of the poem, Wilbur even notes that the snowman “ is moved” by the sight of the boy (11). The form of the poem, with its two juxtaposed stanzas of equal length, calls to mind the image of the boy and the snowman facing each other and also supports the idea they should be read equal, comparable figures. Despite the superficial establishment of the boy and the snowman as parallel figures, however, aspects of the form of the poem, such as the rhyme scheme, actually provide the first hints toward their separateness and disparity. Line 8, in the first stanza, and line 10, in the second, both contain a rhyme that is carried over the stanza break and that thus bridges the gap between the two stanzas: line 8 ends with “ Paradise,” while line 10 ends with “ die.” Though the words are positioned close enough to be recognized as a continuation of the established rhyme pattern, they form an off-rhyme instead of a perfect rhyme; the idea that the two stanzas are connected by an off-rhyme first suggests that the boy and the snowman are not as connected as they initially seem or in the way the reader expects. Further highlighting this rift between the two figures, the poem is filled with contrasts that reveal that the boy and the snowman come from fundamentally different environments. The most obvious way in which Wilbur emphasizes this difference is through the diction in the first two and last two lines, which describe their respective surroundings. Wilbur contrasts the “ dusk and cold” of the snowman’s outside world with the “ light” and “ warmth” inside the boy’s house (2, 16). Additionally, the snowman is completely “ alone,” while the boy is “ surrounded by…such love” (1, 15-6). These contrasting, binary pairs add a level of tension or complexity to the poem’s superficial sense of empathy and connection. Wilbur moves beyond simply evoking the binary oppositions of darkness/light, warmth/cold, and alone/loved in the poem and instead subverts and complicates their hierarchical structure. In the final line of the poem, “ such warmth, such light, such love, and so much fear,” Wilbur lists the privileged or positive halves of these binary oppositions (for example, “ light” is always privileged over darkness, and “ warmth” is always privileged over “ cold”) (16). The sudden interjection of “ fear,” which is a negative concept, immediately disrupts the image of warmth and happiness that has previously characterized the boy’s environment. The position of “ fear” as the final word in the poem, coupled with the idea that there is “ so much” of it, also causes the reader to reconsider the initial, positive nature of the descriptors surrounding the boy’s situation, subverting their privileged position in their binary pair. The subversion of these minor hierarchies in the poem sets up the major irony of the poem, the subversion of the human/inhuman binary pair. Though one might expect that the boy, as a rational, thinking human, would have a higher understanding of his world than the snowman, an inanimate object, the poem actually proves the opposite. In fact, the first stanza posits a number of the boy’s assumptions about the snowman that the second stanza contradicts, indicating that the boy has misinterpreted the snowman and his situation. The boy judges the snowman to have “ bitumen eyes,” while in the second stanza Wilbur reveals that the snowman’s eyes are actually “ soft” (6, 13). Moreover, the boy reads the snowman’s “ stare” as an indication of his unhappiness with the cold and wind (7); however, the second stanza reveals that the snowman is actually “ content” and that to “ go inside” would bring his “ death,” or cause him to melt (9-10). Finally, the boy’s assumption that the snowman’s stare is “ god-forsaken” suggests that he doesn’t realize that the snowman, in the second stanza, is actively looking back and examining the boy in turn (7). The line stating that the boy’s “ tearful sight can hardly reach” the snowman best ultimately indicates that the boy’s way of seeing or interpreting the snowman is lacking (5). Wilbur highlights the boy’s lack of vision or understanding through the use of two biblical allusions in the first stanza. The first possible allusion occurs in the line describing “ a night of gnashing and enormous moan,” the diction of which perhaps calls to mind the parable of the ten talents in the gospel of Matthew in which the unfaithful are cast out into a place characterized by “ wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 25. 30). The final, and perhaps more obvious allusion, is the simile in the last two lines of the first stanza, in which the snowman looks at the boy with a “ stare / as outcast Adam gave to Paradise” (7-8). Again, just as the first allusion, this simile emphasizes a biblical situation in which a sinner has been cast out and punished; this comparison suggests that the boy views the snowman in much the same way, as someone who has been forcibly thrown out into the cold. Reading the second stanza, however, indicates that this is a misinterpretation of the snowman’s reaction, because “ frozen water is his element” (12). The simile that ends the first stanza also contributes to Wilbur’s subversion of the human/inhuman hierarchy through the slippage of these concepts between the vehicle and the tenor. In this simile, Wilbur compares the snowman to Adam and the boy to Paradise. Here, the inanimate snowman is given the agency and humanity of Adam, while the boy is reduced to a location. By endowing the snowman with human properties, both by bringing it to life through personification and by comparing it to Adam, Wilbur complicates the seemingly clear-cut boundaries between life and non-life and provides the basis for the poem’s irony. Contributing to this sense of irony is the fact that, while the boy misinterprets the snowman completely, the snowman gives a fairly accurate reading of the boy’s situation. The snowman views the boy as a “ youngster,” which puts him in a position of authority and wisdom (11). Wilbur sums up the way the snowman sees the boy again using the last two lines: the snowman sheds a tear “ for the child at the bright pane surrounded by / such warmth, such light, such love, and so much fear” (15-6). Here, the final word, “ fear,” again becomes significant because it is the snowman’s most lasting and final observation about the boy. Based on evidence in the rest of the poem, this assessment of the boy seems accurate. When the boy looks out into the world, he is indeed fearful; he interprets the outside world as “ moan[ing],” “ cold,” and lonely, and his only reaction to it is to “ weep” (4, 2, 3). As a result, the boy’s weeping comes from fear, while the snowman’s seems to come from sympathy and understanding, a complete reversal of what the reader might expect. The poem resolves the tension created by the boy’s inability to understand and connect with the snowman by having the snowman connect with the boy, which occurs when he “ is moved” and sheds a “ pure” tear out of sympathy for the boy’s fear (11, 14). As a result, though Wilbur’s “ Boy at the Window” posits separation and misinterpretation, especially through its polarized stanza structure, the poem still retains a tender and gentle tone toward the scene it portrays. Though the boy is unable to transcend his own worldview and connect with the snowman, the snowman ironically possesses the human qualities of logic and sympathy that the boy has not yet developed. The snowman’s kind and sympathetic reaction effectively responds to the boy’s crying and proves, to the reader at least, that the boy doesn’t actually have anything to fear about the larger world outside his window.