Poetry Analysis: “Boy at the Window” by Richard Wilbur

“Boy at the Window” is a gentle poem that explores the innocent anxieties of childhood. The author, Richard Wilbur, uses a different perspective in each of the two stanzas, creating a few ironic surprises that make us think about the harsh realities of winter in a new way. By using the word “boy” rather than a particular boy’s name, Wilbur clearly suggests the experience that the boy undergoes is a universal one.

In stanza 1, we are inside with the boy looking out at the snowman who is “standing all alone,” a comment that creates a lonely tone right from the start. The boy is very distraught as he thinks of what this snowman must endure out there in the vicious winter night – wind, darkness, “gnashings and enormous moan,” elements clearly exaggerated in the mind of the boy who himself fears the night and the creepy sounds it produces. Seeing the “pale-faced” snowman in the distance with its “bitumen” or tar-black eyes makes the boy feel utterly wretched, as if he were viewing the first human himself, Adam, after he’s been ejected from Eden. Wilbur’s use of this Biblical allusion furthers the universality of the poem’s theme and deepens the sense of loneliness in the tone and in the boy – for who of us has not felt “god-forsaken” at some point in our lives? Perhaps Wilbur is suggesting this boy’s Sunday School lessons have filled him with some confused and frightened notions of God’s power and penchant to punish us.

Stanza 2 takes the poem in an entirely new direction, however, as we now shift to the snowman’s perspective and view the boy at the window from outside of the house. Surprisingly, the snowman “is, nonetheless, content,” happy in his cold environment and apparently quite used to it. Right here we see what Wilbur is doing – contrasting the small boy’s fears with the cavalier attitude of nature and suggesting that humans are the weaker of the two, the ones to be pitied for their vulnerability. By personifying the “man of snow” and giving him feelings, Wilbur takes the snow man into the realm of humans and lets him feel pity for the boy’s sadness, “enough to drop from one soft eye/A trickle of the purest rain, a tear”. Of course by having us inside the mind of the snowman at this point, we, too, are led to feel pity for the boy and his misguided distress. The final line uses lovely repetition to stress the idea that the boy leads a very nice life, but even so, being small and naïve, he cannot possibly fathom the big ideas like God, death and nature. Even “surrounded by/Such warmth, such light, such love,” he has “so much fear.” There is so little children can control, and the world is such a big and scary place.

Wilbur intensifies the tone and pathos of his poem by including a tight structure and rhyme. The poem’s conciseness and strong diction keep our attention firmly focused on the two characters as they stare at each other – the boy inside the window, the snowman in the yard. The open vowels in the
rhymes, “o” and “a” and “i,” create drama and yearning in stanza 1, primarily in the words “alone/moan” and “bear/where/stare.” This is tempered a bit in stanza 2 with more the conversational and calm “eh” in the first rhymed pair, “content/element,” whereby the snowman assures us he is not suffering. Some effective alliteration in stanza 1 also adds to the dramatic feel, such as when the boy “weeps to hear the wind,” the “w” being the sound of wailing, and when he sees the “pale-faced figure,” the “p” suggesting a fearful stutter. Contrasting this, the snowman is “moved” when he sees the boy, a calming word with a cooing sound; he also is grounded in his “element” of water and “melts” a drop from his “soft eye”. The “m” sounds here continue a calming feel, and the softness of his eye is in sharp contrast to the boy’s earlier notion of black dots giving off an abysmal stare.

Clearly by the end of the poem, we are to feel more pathos for the boy than for the snowman, and we are to identify more with the snowman, too – the seasoned adult in the scene who has faced his fears and conquered them. The tear he sheds for the boy is not one of sorrow for himself, stuck out in the cold when the boy has “warmth” and “light” and “love,” but a tear for all children who, even amid such security, can look out into the world and feel the fear of the unknown. As a mother, I can relate to this aching pity, and doubly so since my child has autism and has grown up with such layers of misunderstanding to struggle with and navigate. All parents wish more than anything to protect their children from harm, fear and sorrow, but we know it is an inevitability that we can’t shelter them from everything.