

## AP Q1 Re-Write

Prompt: In the following two poems, adults provide explanations for children. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing how each poet uses literary devices to make his point.

In the poems “A Barred Owl” and “The History Teacher,” two poets offer their view on the attempts of adults to shield the innocence of children. Richard Wilbur and Billy Collins both provide cases where a source of fear or corruption is downplayed by adults to comfort children. However, they differ on the intended perception of the adults and justifiability of their actions while enhancing their messages through devices such as word choice and imagery.

Wilbur’s “A Barred Owl” revolves around the scene of a child frightened awake at night by the call of an owl outside. The adults, presumably the parents, proceed to comfort the child by saying all she heard was an “odd question from a forest bird” asking ““Who cooks for you?”” The presentation of a bird’s call as an “odd question” and the signature “hoot hoot” of an owl as ““Who cooks for you?”” gives a light-hearted and humorous tone to the poem as a whole, eliciting a positive view of the adults from the reader. The reader is invited into the world of parenting, gaining an insight into the warm and kind intentions in creating such alternate portrayals in safeguarding the innocence of children. The AABB rhyme scheme furthers the playful nature of the poem, making it read like a children’s book. Overall, such techniques make the poem relatable to both parents and children; it describes an intimate scene that almost everyone has experienced at some point. It is this relatability that lets readers view the adults in this case in a positive and understanding manner.

In contrast, Collin’s “The History Teacher” prompts readers to regard the adult with dissatisfaction and blame. While the adult in this case is also shielding children from undesirable realities, he seems unaware of the negative effects of such protective behaviors. The last stanza of the poem describes the students leaving his classroom “to torment the weak and the smart” while he gathered up his notes and “walked home past flower beds and white picket fences.” Collin’s word choice and imagery provides a juxtaposition of the teacher’s expectations and reality; the negative connotation of the word “torment” is contrasted with the positive scene composed of flower beds and white picket fences, with the contrast becoming starker when considering “white” is associated with purity. This shows that although the adult - the history teacher in this case - believes that his protective actions are beneficial, the students are in reality corrupt. This ignorance of the consequences of his actions, combined with the perception that teachers are supposed to teach truths, contribute to the readers viewing the adult in a negative light.

This touches upon another key difference between Wilbur and Collins’ poems: the nature of the fears adults are trying to protect children from, and by extension, the justifiability of the protection. In Wilbur’s poem, the fear of the owl is portrayed as small or even inconsequential,

as the parents are able to “send a small child back to sleep at night,” implying its insignificance; if the threat was considerable, the child won’t easily go back to sleep. Thus, readers will view the white lies as justifiable, as they have no apparent consequences.

However, the history teacher in Collins’ poem isn’t providing alternate realities for harmless forest animals, but historical atrocities involving the death of millions. Collins specifically selected some of the most violent events in human history to have the teacher downplay and sugarcoat, saying the bombing of Hiroshima was just the Enola Gay dropping “one tiny atom,” the Spanish inquisition was nothing but an “outbreak of questions,” and the War of Roses “took place in a garden.” This lets readers understand that the adult is actually intentionally making his students blind to the horrors of history, or in other words, keeping them ignorant. Believing in false historical alternate realities has greater consequences than accepting the white lies regarding an owl. Thus, the protection of the adult isn’t justified, as Collins implies that it leaves the children worse off.

In conclusion, although both of the poems provide examples of an adult protecting children from reality, Wilbur encourages positive perceptions of the adults while Collins portrays the adult in a negative manner. This is closely linked with the nature of the truths and the justifiability of protection; while Wilbur’s is harmless and inconsequential and therefore justifiable, Collins’ is large and highly relevant and therefore not. The two poems take the same action and place it into two very different contexts, resulting in two different reactions.