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14 September 2014

A Lesson of Words

Richard Wilbur’s poem “The Barred Owl” seems very simple at first, but has a very extensive underlying meaning. This poem has two very specific points: a scared child filled with fear, and an explanation of how impactful words can be when interpreted the wrong way. Fear is imminent through the first half of the poem. A child hears “an owl’s voice into her darkened room” and it can be interpreted that the child makes a meaning out of the owls “Who” (1). The child is filled with fear as she thinks she hears a question of “Who cooks for you?” coming from the owl (1). As a child, you can imagine how fearful it would be to hear an owl hooting in the silence of the night. The poem can be deciphered to mean that the audience is assuring the child the owl is being kind and just asking a simple question, without nothing to worry about or be fearful of. Wilbur’s lines create fear but also reassurance through this first block of the poem. The tone then shifts to reassurance. As the interpretation is understood as being one of the “terrors bravely clear… thus domesticate a fear” the girl is able to go back to sleep (2). The shift tells that after a new reassurance is found the sounds of the “stealthy flight” go unheard as peaceful sleep returns (2); all thought of the owl and any of its nightly activities do not matter anymore. Overall, this poem reflects a mood of fear turned to reassurance as the true sounds of a nightly creature are figured out.