In the poems “A Barred Owl” by Richard Wilbur, and “The History Teacher” by Billy Collins, the protection of innocence by well meaning figures clouds the judgment of children and hides necessary truths of life. In “A Barred Owl”, a small girl is frightened by an owl's hoot. She is told that it is a bird asking “who cooks for you?” Ironically, this falsehood covers up the owl's gruesome eating habits so the girl can sleep secure. In “The History Teacher”, the teacher lies to students about their history. These uneducated go and torment those who really understand. Through their uses of literary devices Wilbur and Collins show the damage adult figures can do by trying to protect the young.

In “A Barred Owl”, irony is important to the meaning of the poem. The child who was frightened awake by the “Boom/ of an owl's voice” is sent to bed comforted by a lie. The child was right to be afraid of a creature who takes “some small thing in claw and eats it raw”. The adults who tell her it is a questioning bird discount her fear by saying that it is nothing to be afraid of “if rightly listened to”. The authors use of the word “we” shows the universal nature of the lies we tell to children to cover up the darker truths about nature. The repeated use of the “small” in the second stanza, applying to both the child and the trapped animal correlates the perceived danger of the bird with real danger. The is sent to with the belief that the “owl” can't hurt her, so she doesn't listen for the dangerous sounds. The correlation between the girl and the owl's prey also suggest a metaphorical function of the owl for danger in general. This shows the author's rhetorical purpose, of showing that we actually harm those who's innocence we try to protect. The title of the poem is also significant when taken in its light. The “Barred Owl” is kept in a seeming cage of ignorance. What the child doesn't know can't hurt her. Barring our fears with polite euphemisms and sweet questions “who cooks for you” damages those who look to influential adult figures for the truth.

Similarly, in the poem “The History Teacher”, reality is skewed for the children's sake. Blatant lies about horrible events in human history add a grotesque almost dark tone to the poem. Structurally, the poem starts far back in history, moving closer and closer to the present until we see the teacher contemplating the future. The increased drama of the lies heightens the feeling of disgust and suspense
in the reader, until we see the results of these lies. The “weak and the smart” are tortured and bullied by those who have seemingly been “protected” by their history teacher from historical pain and guilt. This shows that their supposed innocence has already been corrupted. In the last two lines of the poem, Collins surprisingly diverts his argument by considering future teachings. In the poem, the teacher invents “long, rambling stories” about historical events. These were designed to make the enemy of human conscious and guilt “nod off” and not reveal the horror humans can do to each other. The students' abuse of the smart ones shows that the concept of guilt has “nodded off” and gone to sleep in these children.

In both poems, a danger is disguised for the protection of innocence. In “A Barred Owl”, the danger is real and present but the child asleep and blissfully immune. In “The History Teacher”, past human horrors are glossed over by long, false tales, and the resulting “innocent” children proceed to torment the weak and smart. In both, the guilt lies with the adult trying to protect the young. However, in Wilbur's poem, the child is vulnerable in her innocence. Her fear is domesticated and seems safe. In Collin's poem, those who lack insight to human cruelty are dangerous. They have never felt sympathy or experienced empathy for those different than themselves through history and therefore don't have the emotional capacity to respect the smart students. The environment sterilized of human injustice blinds the children to their own nature. It also shows the history teacher to be blind to the loss of innocence that has already occurred in their nature. In “A Barred Owl”, the child is disturbed and frightened by something that sounds dangerous, but in “The History Teacher”, the students are never disturbed at all. The teacher isn't teaching human history and the owl isn't behind bars just because it suits our taste for him to be. The owl devours more, and the blood of thousands of human beings has stained our world, but protecting children from the ugly aspects of life harms them.

Overall, these poems both use rhetorical devices to show the irony of our protective attitude toward the ones who most need to see life's danger and life's cruelty. These authors show that no matter how we fight against it there is evil in the world that will assault the youth of our society. Telling them
lies to protect them makes them vulnerable and ironically continues the cycle of violence we are trying
to stop.