

## Sample exam question notes for poetry

When working with poetry, you may use the same three-step framework for studying the passage that we used with the prose fiction passage in the book.

### Pay attention

Poems are packed with details and often we need to slow down as readers in order to start seeing them. It is essential that we understand what is happening in a poem before we start to interpret it. The visualization activity below is an excellent way to help you start to understand a poem. It is also something you can do during the actual exam to help you calm your nerves and focus.

### Poetry visualization

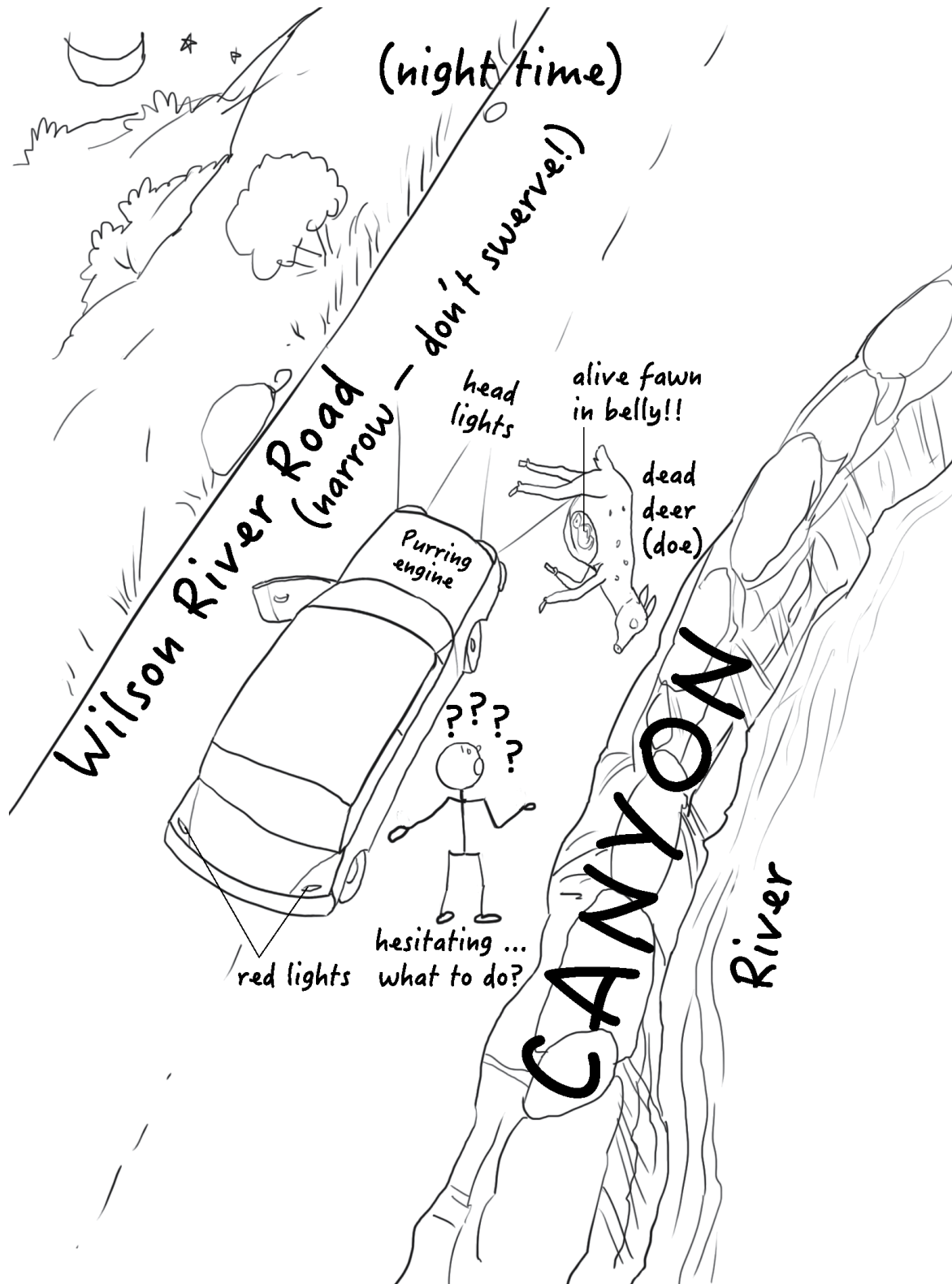
One really good way to focus on a poem and to make yourself pay attention to details is to use a technique called poetry visualization.

*Note: while this exercise is based on the poem in this chapter, you can use it on any poem or passage.*

This is not about artistic quality; it's about ideas.

- Read the poem at least twice.
- Give yourself 5 minutes to sketch a drawing of it (or visualization) on a separate piece of paper, or using a tablet or computer. Time yourself.
- Incorporate words from the poem into your drawing.
- Afterwards: reflect on what you learned about the poem by creating a visualization of it.

Here is a sample sketch of what a visualization of 'Traveling through the Dark' could look like:



By making this sketch, the author was reminded of all the important physical and sensory details in the poem – for example, the information about the car, the deer and the canyon river. After creating this sketch, the author felt more confident about approaching the guiding question.

**Exam tip**

Remember that you will need to make your visualizations quickly and under exam conditions – and that HL students will do this twice – so practise these skills so that you can come to a good understanding of a passage as efficiently as possible.

**Form is important**

Please refer to the poetry section on pages 47–48 for further information about this form and how it connects to ‘Traveling through the Dark’.

**Not everything is equal**

Remember that the guiding question helps you evaluate which ideas are more important to your guided literary analysis. In your initial exploration (taking notes, creating a visualization, colour-marking, etc.) you should try to notice everything you can because you don’t yet know what information will ultimately be useful in helping you to answer the guiding question. For example, you might find ‘large in the belly’ (line 8) to be an interesting metaphor, or euphemism, in your initial exploration, but after focusing in on the guiding question, you will probably realize that it is not a significant idea and that you should focus your energy elsewhere.

The guiding question asks us to consider setting and tension, with setting as the dominant idea.

*How, and in what ways, does the **setting** of this poem create the **tensions** the persona experiences?*

If we return to the analogy of the umbrella on page 51, setting would then be the ‘umbrella’, and ideas like tension and everything that creates the setting and the tension are underneath it.

- 1 Because the question is asking about the setting of the poem, you have to understand what the setting of the poem is. Here are some key quotes (or evidence) that establish the setting of the poem.
  - a It is night-time:
    - i ‘Traveling through the dark’ (line 1)
  - b There is a dead, pregnant, female deer:
    - i ‘I found a deer / dead’ (lines 1–2)
    - ii ‘a doe, a recent killing’ (line 6)
    - iii ‘she had stiffened already, almost cold’ (line 7)
    - iv ‘she was large in the belly.’ (line 8)
    - v ‘her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting, / alive, still, never to be born.’ (lines 10–11)

- c He has been driving in a car:
  - i 'Traveling through the dark' (line 1)
  - ii 'that road is narrow; to swerve' (line 4)
  - iii 'By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car' (line 5)
  - iv key words in stanza 4: car, parking lights, hood, engine, exhaust
- d The road the persona is travelling on is remote and a little dangerous:
  - i 'on the edge of the Wilson River road.' (line 2)
  - ii 'into the canyon:' (line 3)
  - iii 'that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.' (line 4)
  - iv 'Beside that mountain road' (line 12)
  - v 'I could hear the wilderness listen.' (line 16)
  - vi 'pushed her over the edge into the river.' (line 18)

Setting establishes the time and place of a poem, as well as its characters, and can also contribute to conflict in a piece of writing. Consider how the setting of this poem helps create the external conflict the persona experiences, and the internal conflict the persona feels inside.

For more detailed ideas about the role setting can play and how to analyse it, you may wish to consult *Literary Analysis for English Literature: Skills for Success* by Carolyn P. Henly and Angela Stancar Johnson, also published by Hodder Education.

- 2 Because the question is also asking about tensions in the poem, you need to understand what tension is as a literary concept, and what creates it (tension: when expectations build or conflicts develop to create intensity between opposing forces or elements). Here are some things to keep in mind when exploring tension.
  - a Tension can be created by a setting.
    - i In this poem, the persona is stuck in a situation that he did not choose. He was driving his car along a mountain road and encountered a recently killed deer that happened to also be pregnant.
    - ii The road itself is a little dangerous: 'that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.' (line 4)
    - iii The personified 'wilderness' seems to be watching, and maybe judging, his actions: 'I could hear the wilderness listen.' (line 16)

- b Tension can be created by conflicts (internal and external).
  - i The situation itself is an external conflict for him: 'I found a deer / dead' (lines 1–2) and he needs to move the body off the road for safety.
  - ii In moving the body, he discovers 'her fawn lay there waiting, / alive' (lines 10–11), which creates another external conflict.
  - iii These two external conflicts lead to his internal conflict: he doesn't know what to do: 'Beside that mountain road I hesitated.' (line 12)
  - iv His final action of pushing 'her over the edge into the river' (line 18) releases the tension that had been building ... but, ironically, it begins to build tension and internal conflict for the reader – do you agree with the persona's decision to let the fawn die?

Now that we have established these aspects of the poem, you should re-read it with the question in the front of you and see what new ideas emerge.

Here is the question again:

*How, and in what ways, does the setting of this poem create the tensions the persona experiences?*

### Alternative guiding questions for Poetry Paper 1

If you would like to explore a different guiding question than the one provided above, write on one of these instead:

- How does the author's use of punctuation and syntax support the development of the mood in this poem?
- What might be a theme in this poem and how do the authorial choices develop it?
- Consider the poem through the line 'I thought hard for us all', and explore the relationship between the poem's persona and the poem's audience.

Or create your own guiding question!