

The Poetry Question

Some poetry questions direct you to discuss a single aspect of the poem such as its themes or its use of imagery. But more often, AP questions ask you to deal with several major elements of the poem and how they relate to each other, or to the meaning, or most often to the overall effect of the poem. In other words, you must explicate the poem—that is, explain how poetic techniques contribute to the poem's meaning.

What follows is an AP-type question on a poem. It is accompanied by responses written by three students—Mark, Tanya, and Clarissa. The essays are typed as written. After reading each essay, jot down your reactions and then compare your impressions with those of a veteran AP reader.

Question: Read the following poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poet's language, along with such poetic devices as diction, sound, rhyme, and meter, conveys the speaker's attitude toward the taking of human life by hanging.

On Moonlit Heath and Lonesome Bank

On moonlit heath and lonesome bank
The sheep beside me graze;
And yon the gallows used to clank
Fast by the four cross ways.

Line

(5) A careless shepherd once would keep
The flocks by moonlight there,¹
And high amongst the glimmering sheep
The dead man stood on air.

(10) They hang us now in Shrewsbury jail:
The whistles blow forlorn,
And trains all night groan on the rail
To men that die at morn.

(15) There sleeps in Shrewsbury jail to-night,
Or wakes, as may betide,
A better lad, if things went right,
Than most that sleep outside.

(20) And naked to the hangman's noose
The morning clocks will ring
A neck God made for other use
Than strangling with a string.

And sharp the link of life will snap,
And dead on air will stand
Heels that held up as straight a chap
As treads upon the land.

(25) So here I'll watch the night and wait
To see the morning shine,
When he will hear the stroke of eight
And not the stroke of nine;

(30) And wish my friend as sound a sleep
As lads' I did not know,
That shepherded the moonlit sheep
A hundred years ago.

—An excerpt from A. E. Housman,
"A Shropshire Lad," 1896

¹Poet's footnote: "Hanging in chains was called keeping sheep by moonlight."

Tanya's Essay

(Typed as it was written)

Housman's poem "On Moonlit Heath and Lonesome Bank" consists of eight separate stanzas telling the story of a man's feelings about the hanging of a boy he knows who is too good to experience such a terrible fate. The man who is the speaker in the poem is a shepherd taking care of his flock of sheep in the moonlight on a heath near a crossroads where "gallows used to clank" (line 3) and people were hung. He is waiting there for the boy to be hung the next morning in Shrewsbury jail.

The feelings of the man are conveyed through the poem's diction, sound, rhyme and meter. He speaks in affectionate terms about the boy, calling him a "lad" (15) and a "friend" (29). He obviously sympathizes with him because he uses phrases to show that the boy was unlucky in life—"if things went right" (15) he wouldn't be waiting to die, because he is "better . . . Than most that sleep outside" (15-16). He also adds that God made the boy's neck "for other use" (19) than having a noose put around it.

The speaker also talks about hanging in diction that indicates how terrible it is. He mentions the "dead man stood on air" (9) meaning swinging from a rope, and "strangling with a string" (20) as the man chokes to death. He uses the word "snap" (21) to create the sound that occurs when the body falls and the neck breaks. Even though he vividly describes hanging with such strong, tactile images, he stays calm about it, waiting patiently until the morning and refers to his friend's death as a sound sleep (29).

So basically, there is an ambiguous tone in the poem, partly violent and gross, partly calm and peaceful. It's like the speaker is sad but since he can't do anything about it he accepts the boy's fate as if it were God's plan.

That sense of a plan is also reflected in the sounds, rhymes and meter of the poem. It is all carefully laid out with a steady rhythm that remains the same from one stanza to the next. Each stanza is four lines. In each, the first and third lines and the second and fourth lines rhyme. There also are many uses of alliteration also. For example in "Fast by the four cross ways" (4) and "Than strangling with a string" (20). The poet also uses sound to support the meaning, as in "snap" (see above) and the onomatopoeia of "whistles blow forlorn" (10) and "trains all night groan" (11).

The kind of laid-back attitude portrayed by the speaker is natural for a shepherd, a man whose life is spent quietly taking care of sheep. An urban person might object to the hanging of the boy, but that is not in the lifestyle of a meek and humble shepherd. He accepts his own fate just as he accepts the fate of the boy.

Your impressions: _____

Clarissa's Essay

(Typed as it was written)

A.E. Housman's poem On Moonlit Heath and Lonesome Bank expresses more than just a literal description of a young man's hanging. Using the structure of the poem, and the author's word choice and images, a more profound statement is being made. Since the boy will be put to death in the morning, the author concentrates on his feelings about hanging during the night before.

The poem is separated into eight stanzas. This structure allows Housman to use three stanzas to describe the scene, including the "moonlit heath and lonesome bank" (line 1). In the next five stanzas he tells about the boy, including that he is a good boy who is

"A better lad, if things went right,
Than most that sleep outside."

Then the last stanza returns to the moonlit heath where the poem began.

The authors' word choice also contributes to the deeper message of the poem. He uses certain diction that conveys an opposition to hanging, such as "clank (line 3), naked (line 17), and strangling (line 20)." These words describe hanging as the most brutal, awful way to die. They show him being a sensitive person who shows empathy to the victim of the hanging and tries to convey his feelings about capital punishment in general.

These feelings are conveyed even more by the images that he uses. He talks about the dead man who "stood on air (line 8)", using a visual image, whistles "that blow" (line 10) using sound imagery, and the noose around the "neck made for other use" (line 19), a tactile image. Then, he returns to a visual and sound images associated with the hanging in lines 26-28, where he refers to seeing the "morning shine" and hearing the "stroke of eight/And not the stroke of nine."

Finally, I think Housman was ahead of his time. He wrote the poem in 1896, but his arguments against cruel and unusual punishment are just as important to today's world, especially because DNA testing proves that many innocent men have been executed, or been put in jail, for crimes they didn't perform. Therefore, the poem is just as relevant today, or maybe even more so.

Your impressions: _____

Mark's Essay

By using a large number of contrasting images A.E. Housman's poem "On Moonlit Heath and Lonesome Bank," illustrates the theme that the taking of human life by hanging is a cruel and violent act. In addition, the diction and tone help in making a deeper statement about life and death.

In the first stanza the speaker is on a peaceful moonlit heath among grazing sheep. Being there, where criminals once were hung, provides a contrast between the tranquil scene and violence that took place there. This contrast is emphasized when the peaceful imagery of lines 1 and 2 is broken by the "clank" of chains in line 3. This juxtaposition introduces a kind of duality that dominates the poem and is also reflected in the poet's footnote. To call hanging a man in chains "keeping sheep" is an ironic idea that appears to make the point that the hangmen of the past couldn't face the reality of what they were doing so made up a euphemism for their actions.

In stanza 2, the tranquil image of sheep in the moonlight is set against the eerie image of a hanged man who "stood on air." This contrast has a parallel in the speaker himself. Outwardly he's at peace, but inside he is mentally and emotionally wrought up. His language is plain and casual, but the clash of images implies that the speaker is intensely emotional. However, the reason for this intensity is not explained until the fourth stanza where he explains that a "lad," is waiting to be put to death in Shrewsbury jail. The speaker is disturbed about the impending execution of a boy who doesn't deserve it mainly because he is "better" than "most that sleep outside." (line 16).

Another contrast is set up in the third stanza by explaining that the site of hangings has been switched from the moonlit heath to the Shrewsbury jail. Hangings were once accompanied by the bleating of sheep but are now done where trains groan and whistles "blow forlorn," sounds that make the scene of the hangings even harsher and more grim.

In line 18 the speaker uses a pun on the word "ring." It may seem inappropriate to play word games in a poem about an execution, but since the poem uses many contrasts, the pun is consistent with speaker's double-sided view of the world. Likewise, the word "string" in line 20 is used for "rope," making light of something quite serious. One might argue that the poet used "string" for the sake of the rhyme with "ring," but "string" makes sense when you think of hangings as people "strung up" on the gallows. Therefore, "string" preserves the pattern of duality in the entire poem.

Wherever the hanging takes place—on the heath or at the jail—lines 21-22 return to the gruesomeness of the act. The effects are the same regardless of the location—the "dead on air will stand"—an allusion to line 8 ("The dead man stood on air") that helps to unify the poem and supports the speaker's intent to portray hanging as an example of society's sick behavior.

Line 25 returns us to the moonlit heath of line 1, where the speaker will continue his vigil until morning shine. The emphasis on "shine" is poignant since it contrasts with the darkness that the lad must face, both in his last hours on earth and forever after. The casual reference to eight o'clock and nine o'clock signifies the passing of another typical hour, implying that the world goes on even though the lad will not. Incidentally, the speaker himself depends on euphemism here because he cannot face the fact of the lad's hanging. Instead of coming right out and saying that the lad will be executed, he softens the idea by saying "When he will hear the stroke of eight/And not the stroke of nine" (lines 27-28), leaving the reality of what happens unspoken.

In the last stanza the speaker refers to other men who tended sheep in the past. They, too, are dead, like the lad and like he himself will be one day. In a way, he is fatalistically accepts the future that all men face. Saying that we will all die is a fairly trite idea, but if you reconsider the footnote, that keeping sheep means the same as hanging by chains, a

AP English Literature and Composition

shocking element has suddenly been added to the poem. Basically, "keeping sheep" is really just a metaphor for "preparing to die." All of us in a sense are "keeping sheep," although we call it "going to school" or "applying to college," etc.

The subject of the poem is morbid, but Housman won't let the style of writing be morbid. The use of a pun (explained above) and colloquial usage like "lad" and "chap" keeps the tone light, as do the short stanzas, brief lines, and consistent bouncy rhymes. The matter-of-fact informality of a poem that has a ponderous and grim theme give it a wry humor bordering on dark, or black humor, but the contrast between the light style and the dark subject is consistent with the main premise of the poem.

Maybe it is callous to treat death by hanging with a sense of humor. Giving the poet the benefit of the doubt, the subject is terribly painful for the speaker—almost too awful to contemplate. Therefore, he plays down the pain and uses a flippant tone to cover over his deep bitterness and sorrow. He gains artistically by doing that because it makes the impending execution more horrible.

Your impressions: _____
