

The Death of a Toad by Richard Wilbur | Poem Analysis

'*The Death of a Toad*' by Richard Wilbur is a three-stanza poem that is separated into sets of six lines, or sestets. These sestets conform to a consistent and structured pattern of rhyme. The lines follow a scheme of aabcbc, alternating as the poet saw fit from stanza to stanza.

Wilbur has crafted this piece as an extended metaphor that meditates on the meaning of life and the existence of realms beyond our own. Through the mutilation and death of a toad, the speaker contemplates the power of nature and what ability humankind has to control its own destiny. These themes expand far beyond the world of an injured and dying toad.

Additionally, a reader should take note of the instances of personification that take place throughout the text. Wilbur has chosen to personify the toad and its environment. The world of *The Death of a Toad* is alive in every conceivable way. This was done in an effort to enhance one's empathy for the dying animal and bring nature into greater focus. One instance in which the environment is given characteristics normally only attributed to humans is in the last stanza. The speaker describes the ocean as being 'ebullient' or full of cheerful energy.

Summary of *The Death of a Toad*

'*The Death of a Toad*' by Richard Wilbur speaks on the death of a toad and relates the tragedy to the larger problem of humankind's conflict with nature.

The poem begins with the speaker describing how the toad was run over by a mower. Its leg was irreparably damaged; so much so it had to stagger over the hedges to find safety. Here, in the relative sanctuary of the garden, the toad is preparing to die. When the time comes it does not die dramatically. Its calm and peaceful death is lead up to by the emptying of its "heartsblood."

In the final section, the speaker goes into the problems that the whole population of "amphibia" has with humankind. They look on as their world is "castrated" by human-made inventions. It is clear the speaker is condemning humankind for its disregard of other species. He does not have hope that anything will change in the future.

Analysis of *The Death of a Toad*

Stanza One

A toad the power mower caught,
Chewed and clipped of a leg, with a hobbling hop has got
(...)
Of the ashen and heartshaped leaves, in a dim,
Low, and a final glade.

In the first stanza of *'The Death of a Toad'*, the speaker begins by stating the main action of this piece. It is the drama of the toad being "caught" in a "power mower" that spurs on the rest of the narrative. Wilbur chose to craft his opening line in a succinct manner that is shocking to the point. There is no rising action to help pave the way for the painful event which befalls the toad.

Luckily, or unluckily, the toad is not killed by the mower. One of his legs has been injured. It was "Chewed and clipped" until it was not longer possible for him to move naturally on it. In response to this altered state, the toad now moves with a "hobbling hop." The two uses of alliteration in this line help to move the poem along and create a sing-song like feeling. From the yard where he was injured, the toad does his best to make it to the "garden verge." It is here he believes he will find sanctuary, or at least somewhere he can die in peace.

The toad has moved out-of-the-way of the mower and become "santuaried," or fall under the protection of, the "cineraria leaves." One should note at this point that the toad has not found a way out of the garden, but gone deeper into it. There does not seem to be a possibility of him finding true safety outside the realm of human influence.

It is under the "cineraria leaves" and in the...

Shade

Of the ashen and heartshaped leaves

That the toad is preparing himself to die. This detailed description of what the plant looks like helps one to envision the scene in full. It is not a light and cheery place the toad has found, but a "dim one." The "glade," or open space under the flowers, is "Low" and without light. This is a depressing ending to life, no matter what, or who, one is.

Stanza Two

**The rare original heartsblood goes,
Spends in the earthen hide, in the folds and wizenings, flows
(...)
And soundlessly attending, dies
Toward some deep monotone,**

In the second sestet, the speaker goes on to delve deeper into what it means to die. He expands on the process of death, and how that process plays out for the toad. The "original heartsblood" of the toad "goes" into the earth. It pours out from the wound and into the ground. There is no way for the animal to stop or staunch it. He cannot tend to his own injuries. The only option is to wait and see if he lives or dies. He expects it to be later.

The toad appears to be dying peacefully in the glade. He is so “still” it is as if he is attempting to “return to stone.” This would be a state in which one feels no pain. It is also a reference to transformation and another life that is beyond the present.

The build-up to the toad’s death is completed in the fifth line of the stanza. He does indeed die. His death comes “soundlessly.” The speaker describes death as a force that “attend[s]” to the animal. One should take note of the fact that “attend” is a personal word. It brings up feelings of a personal relationship and care. Wilbur is emphasizing the importance of this animal’s death in the larger scheme of the world. He is attended to just as any human would be.

In the final line, the progress of death is described as being “monotone.” There is no drama at the end of this animal’s life. Everything simply fades away. The speaker will expand on where the toad’s essence or soul might’ve ended up in the third stanza.

Stanza Three

**Toward misted and ebullient seas
And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia’s emperies.
(...)
To watch, across the castrate lawn,
The haggard daylight steer.**

In the last six lines of the poem, the speaker finishes the thought started at the end of the second stanza. He concludes the phrase by stating that the toad’s life-force is going off...

**Toward misted and ebullient seas
And cooling shores**

As stated above, Wilbur describes the seas as being “ebullient.” This is a prime example of personification. The sea is spoken of as if it has human characteristics. It is “misted” and energetic in this case. These initial lines do not make death sound like something to be feared.

This is emphasized by the addition of the words “Amphibia’s emperies.” The line speaks of a world that is ruled by “amphibia,” or toads, frogs salamanders, etc. This is a place that is failing. It still exists but now spends its time watching the “Day dwindle.”

Wilbur is turning the narrative of the poem to address the state of humanity. He is interested in speaking on the impact that humankind has on the planet from the perspective of the toad. From their height, the mowers move across their once habitable lawns and “castrate” them. They cut the grass down as if removing something vital and necessary to reproduction.

Due to the nature of humanity, the world of the toad is failing. The “daylight” is being “steer[ed]” by humankind and becoming “haggard.” Wilbur’s speaker does not seem to have much hope for the future. He sees the world as continuing along these lines until humankind has done away with everything in its path.

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The Death of a Toad Analysis

The Poem

Richard Wilbur’s “The Death of a Toad” hauntingly depicts the demise of a toad “caught” and “clipped” by a power mower in a garden accident. The incident was apparently witnessed by Wilbur, who responded in verse—enlarging the event to metaphoric and symbolic proportions reflecting the poet’s concerns with a metaphysical reality beyond material existence; with the nature and meaning of death; and with the extinction of primal forces by an inevitable, unstoppable, and impersonal technology. The poem is composed of three stanzas, each with six lines of varying lengths, visually and metrically balanced to one another. The form and balance of the stanzas create a visual and formal precision, a sort of metrical “cage” in ironic counterpoint to the disturbing portrayal of the toad’s last moments on earth.

Themes and Meanings

If the plight of humankind is equated with the toad’s, then the picture painted by the poem’s episode is that human beings are mere victims of a machinery of their own making, symbolically enlarged to all of human technology in the image of the power mower. This is coupled with the idea that the human spirit hopes for a spiritual existence beyond the physical world that assumes various and ambiguous forms—in the poem as a nothingness (“some deep monotone”), a perfect heaven (“ebullient seas/ And cooling shores”), or a grand and opulent reward (“emperies”).

Yet, unfortunately, these forms are undermined by a depressing and bereft world—bereft, perhaps, of certain knowledges, such as the watching of the toad, that one has lost or looks upon without seeing. The toad is also emblematic of all of nature—from the beginning of time—because it is described as “antique” and “original” and having an “earthen hide.” The loss of humans’ sense of primal energy and their connection to nature is reflected not only in the toad’s eyes but also in the poet’s awareness that they merely “appear to watch.” Thus, the toad is at once a metaphor for humankind and nature, irrevocably linking the two.

Representative of vibrant, vital, and primal nature, the toad also stands for humankind unwarily mowed down by its own technology. It is this very dichotomy and ambiguity—toad as human and toad as nonhuman—that reverberates such a richness of meaning in the poem.

Theme of importance

"Death of a Toad" conveys themes of the importance and brevity of life, in addition to reflections on nature and its relation to humanity. The mower and frog's death are symbolic of how quickly our lives could end. A cold read would only reveal the superficial setting of the toad's death, but closer analysis shows that the speaker in the poem is observing the toad and contemplating its life as well as his own. Specific structure, diction and imagery are devices that facilitate comprehension of these themes. The structure details events as they happen, and additionally starts and ends on notes corresponding to the mood. The speaker is initially indifferent to the poem's occurrences but towards the end is more concerned about his actions. Diction, including words like "monotone", "ebullient", and "haggard" capture the solemnity of the moment. Imagery accurately describes both the literal and figurative meanings of elements such as the lawn and frog. This is best seen when the speaker contemplates what the frog experiences as he dies.

The Death of a Toad

To us, The poem communicates the different aspects of death. One aspect is the brutality and gruesomeness of it during death, the other being the peacefulness after death; where there is no more pain and only peace.

Title: At first glance, "The Death of a Toad" seems fairly comical, almost absurd. It is such an insignificant part of the minutia of life that it seems simply ridiculous that a poet would even write about such a subject.

Paraphrase: A power lawn mower catches the leg of a toad and mangles it, forcing the toad to grotesquely hop across the "castrate[d] lawn". Throughout this process the narrator provides imagery of the toad instead hopping in mystic, spiritual lands to a "final glade". He then imagines the toad's glorious death and imagines an afterlife for the toad in which the toad can experience "ebullient seas" and "cooling shores" in an amphibian ruled kingdom.

Devices:

- Irony - the backbone of the poem, irony allows Wilbur to glorify the toad yet at the same time, through dramatic irony also allows him to create humor and very light satire
- Imagery - the device which allows Wilbur's irony to shine through. "Chewed and clipped", "hobbling hop", "banked and staring eyes", are all violent and grotesque but are also contrasted with "a final glade", "misted and ebullient seas", and "lost Amphibia's emperies"

- Rhyme - masculine rhymes with an AABCBC rhyme scheme creates a whimsical, sing-song tone which contrasts with the often times harsh, stark imagery
- Meter - referred to by Wilbur as "loose iambic". Often choppy, with uneven, cacophonous sound which parallels the three legged toad's also choppy, uneven, and bloody floundering across the lawn.
- Paradox - one of the most prominent, most effective devices used in the poem. In fact, it is really a poem of contradictions or paradoxes. First, the toad is dying, but it is only in death that we are really able to see the life of the toad. Then, the journey of the toad is elegant and royal, but at the same time we also know that the toad is only hobbling across a lawn to die. While the death of the toad seems glorious and epic, Wilbur uses dramatic irony to remind us that it is only an insignificant toad. Even the language and imagery of the poem is vivid and elegant but it is also harsh, garish and grotesque.

Attitude: The attitude or the tone is likewise filled with paradoxes. It is respectful and glorifying but at the same time violent and grotesque. Likewise Wilbur uses epic language such as "The rare original heartsblood goes" and the anachronistic "Amphibia's emperies" which contrasts not only with the violent imagery but also with the modern image of the "power [lawn] mower" and "castrate[d] lawn". In the end, this all combines to be a paradoxical, gently satirical, and self-aware attitude toward the poem.

Shifts: The shift after line two coincides with the shift from modern, harsh imagery to classical elegant imagery, the shift from the toad's death to the afterlife journey. Later shift at line sixteen shows accomplishes the same thing except in reverse. Reminds the us of the dramatic irony and keeps the toad's death in perspective.

Title: While at first the title seemed simply ridiculous, it is now more. It is still ridiculous, that it is a poem about a toad, yet in an ironic, self-aware style. Through this, Wilbur confirms our expectations of an absurd poem, but also defies them through his epic treatment of the toad in another use of paradox.

Theme/Total Meaning: The poem as a whole is meant as a subtle yet comic irony on the complexities of modern life as we can see through the very obvious use of irony. However, the paradoxes and self-aware nature of the poem are also hard to ignore. In this way, the irony is not only directed towards the death of the toad but also towards the audience, the poet, and the poem itself. In this sort of meta-poem, it could be read as Wilbur sort of mocking his own use of language in which in can manipulate words, sound, and literary devices to impact his audience and their perception of the poem.