

"Death of a Toad"  
1997

AP II

The College Board  
Advanced Placement Examination  
ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

SECTION II

Total time—2 hours

Question 1

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

Read the following poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how formal elements such as structure, syntax, diction, and imagery reveal the speaker's response to the death of a toad.

The Death of a Toad

Line  
(5) A toad the power mower caught,  
Chewed and clipped of a leg, with a hobbling hop has got  
To the garden verge, and sanctuaried him  
Under the cineraria<sup>1</sup> leaves, in the shade  
Of the ashen heartshaped leaves, in a dim,  
Low, and a final glade.

(10) The rare original heartsblood goes,  
Spends on the earthen hide, in the folds and wizenings, flows  
In the gutters of the banked and staring eyes. He lies  
As still as if he would return to stone,  
And soundlessly attending, dies  
Toward some deep monotone,

(15) Toward misted and ebullient seas  
And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies<sup>2</sup>.  
Day dwindles, drowning, and at length is gone  
In the wide and antique eyes, which still appear  
To watch, across the castrate lawn,  
The haggard daylight steer.

—Richard Wilbur

"The Death of a Toad," from *Ceremony and Other Poems* by  
Richard Wilbur. Copyright © 1950, 1978 by Richard Wilbur.  
Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace and Company.

<sup>1</sup>Ornamental plants with silvery foliage; from "cinerarium," a place for keeping the ashes of a cremated body

<sup>2</sup>Empires

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE

AP12

Whatever you do, summarize the complexity of the work & that's the sign of a human history + experience.

**SCORING GUIDE**  
**"Death of a Toad"**  
Scoring Guide: AP English Literature, Question 1 (1997)

**GENERAL DIRECTIONS:** This scoring guide will be useful for most of the essays that you read; but for cases in which it seems problematic or inapplicable, please consult your Table Leader. The score you assign should reflect your judgment of the quality of the essay as a whole--its content, its style, its mechanics. Reward the writers for what they do well. The score for an exceptionally well-written essay may be raised one point from the score otherwise appropriate. In no case may a very poorly written essay be scored higher than 3.

**9-8:** These well-organized and well-written essays integrate an analysis of the poem's formal elements with an insightful discussion of the speaker's response to the death of the toad. Though not without flaws, they demonstrate the writers' ability to read perceptively and to write with clarity and sophistication.

**7-6:** These essays also demonstrate how formal elements of the poem convey the speaker's reaction to the toad's death. But in describing Wilbur's poetic strategies, they are less thorough or less precise than essays in the topmost range. In addition to minor flaws in interpretation, their discussion is likely to be less well-supported and less incisive. Although these essays demonstrate the writer's ability to articulate ideas clearly, they lack the mastery and control of composition possessed by papers in the 9-8 range.

**5:** These essays are superficial. Although they struggle to describe the speaker's attitude, their discussion tends to be vague, mechanical, or inadequately supported. They manage the assigned task without important errors of interpretation, but they have little to say beyond what is most obvious and easy to grasp. As exegesis, they deal with the poem in a cursory manner; they are not as well conceived, organized, or developed as upper-half papers. Often they manifest simplistic thinking and/or immature writing.

**4-3:** These lower-half papers reflect an incomplete or oversimplified understanding of the poem. Their discussion of the speaker's response is limited or skewed, and/or they do not convincingly explain how the formal elements of the poem create and convey that response. Although not without sensible observations, they misread portions of the poem or offer assertions that may be unsupported or even irrelevant. The writing typically reveals uncertain control over the elements of college-level composition. Essays scored 3 exhibit more than one of the above infelicities; they are marred by significant misinterpretation, poor development, or serious omissions.

**2-1:** These essays compound the weaknesses of the papers in the 4-3 range. They may seriously misread the poem. Often, they are unacceptably brief. They may be poorly written on several counts, and may contain many distracting errors in grammar and mechanics. Although some attempt may have been made to discuss how the formal elements of the poem project the attitude of the speaker, the writers' observations are presented with little clarity, organization, or supporting evidence. Essays that are especially inexact, vacuous, and/or mechanically unsound should be scored 1.

**0:** This is a response with no more than a reference to the task.

--: Indicates a blank response or an essay that is completely off-topic.

**AP Toad Essay**

**The prompt:** *Write a well-organized essay in which you explain how the formal elements such as structure, syntax, diction, and imagery reveal the speaker's response to the death of a toad.*

Few people would expound upon "The Death of a Toad" with such a vengeance as did Richard Wilbur in his poem of the same name. Apparently, there is more meaning to be found in such an event than most people realize. Wilbur asks his reader to follow him for a moment in exploring that meaning. His response to the death of a toad is amply represented through his use of various literary techniques.

Before addressing those techniques, it is necessary to define the response and its meaning. The poem's title seems to proceed from the unspoken beginning: "My response to . . . ." The reader must realize this if he is to gain any useful interpretation of the poem, since he also must realize that this is a subjective point of view which may differ from the way he would see it. The entire flow of the poem hovers on mournful but is also full of the knowledge that there are so many millions upon millions of other small creatures whose lives are cut short by such of man's devices as "the power mower"; Mr. Toad is just one more. However, the fact that Wilbur chooses to address this individual toad's tragic story shows that he still feels sorrow for even the death of a toad. It is important to consider these points when showing how they are made.

The diction that Wilbur chooses, as well as the order in which he chose to place them, added to the conveyance of his meaning. He chooses a delicate and striking poetic word order through most of the poem. For instance, in the first two lines, Wilbur writes, "A toad the power mower caught; / chewed and clipped off a leg" (1-2) when he could just as easily write, "The lawn mower ran over a toad and cut its leg off." But he does not. He chooses to spice things up a bit, substituting "power" for just "the." This also add to the points made in the poem about the careless power of humans. He also used the eloquent phrase, "chewed and clipped" (2), rather than simply saying "cut off." Again, this adds to his points about the raw and reckless power of man. Nothing was more important to the solemnity of this poem, though, than the clearly poetic word order. Even a toad, perhaps, deserves a dignified elegy, however graphic.

AP14

Another example of structure, syntax and diction completing Wilbur's effect can be found in lines 11-14: "[He] dies / toward some deep monotone, / toward misted and ebullient seas / and cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's Emperies." "Wow," says the reader, "this must be some toad to get such a send-off." This toad didn't just pass away; his spirit merged with the essence of the universe as a creation held its breath for a moment, and he entered the eternal kingdom. But wait, this is just some toad, a nobody, even in his own element. How is it that he gets such an "Ode to Toad," whereas most of us will be forgotten before we're cold in the ground? These impressions are meant to remind the reader that every creature is special for his own reasons, and every creature will die someday. Without the use of phrasings such as, "... toward misted and ebullient seas" (13), or the use of specialized and archaic forms such as, "Amphibia's Emperies" (14), none of these points would have half the impact they do. It is all in the words here.

Even so, the imagery is just as important, as it goes hand in hand with the wording of the poem. The image in lines 6-9 of the toad bleeding to death are particularly striking: "The rare original heartsblood goes / spends on the earthen hide in the folds and wizenings, flows / In the gutters of the banked and staring eyes." The occasion is given more momentum, as it were, through these stark but profound scenes. The image of the blood, as it "flows / In the gutters of the banked and staring eyes" (8-9) is very powerful. The reader can at most see the total silence and feel the gravity and sorrow of this event. This toad was some toad; he was just as meaningful as a grandparent with "folds and wizenings" (8) on his face, just as a person of venerable standing would. The images create the scene.

The title, at first glance, might draw the potential reader in if he thinks it might be almost funny but that is not what is in the poem. Instead, such a reader encounters all the poetic feeling, all the imagery, all the big words and stilted English usually reserved for dead heroes. And this is just some toad. That is what we are meant to realize, that yes, this is just some toad. But where does it become meaningful? When ten creatures have died at the hands of an unfeeling humanity? Fifty? A thousand? A billion? We all live here and must do what we must do to survive. But Wilbur recognizes and tells us that we must be careful and stay in control of our technology and our recklessness. It could be us on the bad end of an accident someday.

## Richard Wilbur's Letter About "The Death of a Toad"

AP  
15

Dear Penny,

I don't get letters like yours every day, and I wish I did. It makes me pleasantly dizzy to think of being read by 170,000 teachers for a week. In the long history of exposure, it beats even Gypsy Rose Lee.

Let me see what I can remember about the poem's inception. The poem was first published in *Poetry* (Chicago) in February of 1948, and that means that it was written during the lawn-mowing months of 1947. We (Charlee and I and our daughter Ellen) were then living in Cambridge, and I, having earned an M.A. at Harvard, was about to begin a three-year Junior Fellowship there. At some time during the summer, Charlee's cousins, the Tapleys, who lived in Wellesley Hills, invited us to look after their house and grounds while they went off on a vacation jaunt. We were happy to get out of the city, and the house was far bigger and airier than our Plympton Street apartment, and so the sojourn in Wellesley Hills was agreeable to us, even though we felt somewhat oppressed by what we perceived as the tepid gentility of the town.

Most of my poems are made out of accumulated thoughts and feelings and perceptions, and almost never does it happen that I have an experience and then go straight to a chair and write about it. But that's how it happened with "The Death of a Toad." Mowing the Tapley's suburban lawn one day, I mortally injured a toad, and before the day was out I had made that into a poem. Why did that occur? I think it was because I was young, and just out of military service, and spoiling to live, and felt, as I said before, oppressed by the safe, somnolent retirement-village atmosphere of Wellesley Hills; part of me identified, therefore, with the toad, and made me see the toad as representing the primal energies of the Earth, afflicted by the sprawl of our human dominion.

The first two lines of the third stanza are out to associate [the] toad with those "primal energies"—and of course there is biological ground for doing so. The words are out to magnify the toad and at the same time to be disarming about that—to acknowledge by an undertone of humor that I am making a great deal of a very small creature. My tonal ambiguity has worked for some readers but did not work, as I recall, for Randall Jarrell.

The poem has an ad hoc stanza form, created by the way the phrasing wanted to happen. It's scannable as a "loose iambic" poem in the metrical pattern 465543. I think that in '47 I was beginning to enjoy incorporating the six-foot line in some of my made-up stanzas; later I did so in a poem called "Beasts." The six-footer being very often a slow and awkward measure, it's a challenge to use it effectively, and in support of one's meaning.

Whether my toad actually took refuge under a cineraria or not, I can't say; but it had the right shape and shade of leaf for my poem. I recall, for some reason, that the first stanza originally ended "in a dim, / Low, and an ultimate glade." That sounded too good to me, and I knew why when I remembered Poe's description of Dream-Land as "an ultimate dim Thule." In the first lines of the poem I imagined the declining sun as moving—so setting suns may appear to do—along the horizon, and that's what led me to use the verb "steer," which has given trouble to a number of my readers. Quite reasonably, some have seen in that word not a verb meaning "to pursue a course" but a noun meaning "a castrated animal." It's led me to consider, more than once, replacing "steer" with "veer."

Does that give you what you were after? Thank you for the news of Barbara and of the tearing-up of our lane in Key West, and our very best wishes to you,

Dick

)