1.5 THE WILD

We’ve got rain all across the metropolitan area now, there’s been a little bit of sleet that’s bounced around but this is, uh, mostly just a cold, wet, nasty rain and it’ll rain pretty steadily into the middle part of the afternoon with, uh, a high of thirty-eight. Clouds tonight, low thirty-four. Variable cloudiness tomorrow, perhaps a few brighter intervals, and, uh, if we, uh, get even a little bit of sun, the temperature tomorrow will get into the forties. Clouds, wind and rain back for Friday, in fact, could be pretty stormy, Friday afternoon and Friday night, with winds gusting to forty miles an hour. Clearing begins Saturday afternoon, and Sunday looks mostly sunny and pleasant with a high near sixty. Right now it’s thirty-five and cloudy in Central Park, temperature today going up to thirty-eight.

Well, it’s not very nice outside, and it’s not going to get a whole lot, uh, in fact, probably not going to get any better, as we go through the day. We’re going to have rain intermittently today and tonight, and into tomorrow morning, some of the rain will be heavy, eh, other times, the rain can stop completely. And there will also continue to be a gusty wind, that wind gusting frequently to thirty miles per hour, and occasionally to between thirty and forty miles per hour. The temperature not much above forty, so not only is it wet, but it’s kind of nasty and cold. Clearing tomorrow afternoon, though, and with the sun coming out, temperatures will jump into the fifties, and then Sunday should be mostly sunny, with a high around sixty. But right now, it’s forty and raining in Central Park, and that wind out of the northeast, gusting to twenty-nine miles per hour. Repeating the current temperature forty, going up to forty-four today.

Well, it will be a cool and breezy day today, but no rain, and although there’ll be a lot of clouds. Uh, the sun will peek out from time to time, in place to place, and that gets temperatures into the forties for the first time all week long. Tomorrow, though, a rainy windy day, uh, windy, chilly with temperatures in the low to middle-forties, and some of the rain, tomorrow, tomorrow night, will be heavy enough to cause street and highway flooding. It clears on Saturday and Sunday looks good, mostly sunny and the high-fifty-six to sixty. Iraqi weather has cooled down, it’ll be dry through the weekend, relatively comfortable, sixties in the northern part of the country and, uh, no higher than the eighties in Baghdad. Right now in Central Park, forty degrees and cloudy, the high today forty-eight.

Well, it’s not very nice outside, and it’s not going to get a whole lot, uh, in fact, probably not going to get any better, as we go through the day. We’re going to have rain intermittently today and tonight, and into tomorrow morning, some of the rain will be heavy, eh, other times, the rain can stop completely. And there will also continue to be a gusty wind, that wind gusting frequently to thirty miles per hour, and occasionally to between thirty and forty miles per hour. The temperature not much above forty, so not only is it wet, but it’s kind of nasty and cold. Clearing tomorrow afternoon, though, and with the sun coming out, temperatures will jump into the fifties, and then Sunday should be mostly sunny, with a high around sixty. But right now, it’s forty and raining in Central Park, and that wind out of the northeast, gusting to twenty-nine miles per hour. Repeating the current temperature forty, going up to forty-four today.

Weather reports

1. This extract is identified as a poem. Is there any other way to know that this is a poem without being told that it is one? Does it matter?
2. Are there essential elements to a poem?
3. Kenneth Goldsmith is a conceptual poet who often pulls his work from newspapers or other sources. The Weather is a book-long poem that is an exact transcription of radio weather reports over the course of a year. Once a work is presented to you as a poem, do you read it differently from the way you would a normal weather report? Does this “poem” mean something different from a weather report? Does it call attention to different features or ideas? Do we focus on language in a different way when we know that it is a poem?
4. Another question might be: Does this count as a creative work of art? Is it simply enough to pull already existing text out of its original contest and call it poetry?
5. Is this piece more “useful” as a poem or as a weather report? Is it more interesting as a poem or as a weather report?

Readers, writers and texts and writing that is wild

The poem on the opposite page is an example of a work of literature that is particularly strange or difficult. Though we can certainly read the poem, we may not be sure what we are supposed to do with it or how we are supposed to respond. A good way of considering the function of any form of communication is to consider those times when communication seems problematic and to investigate why we might have problems in knowledge, understanding or interpretation. We may know how to listen to a weather report, but if it is presented as a poem, we aren’t sure what to do with it. Not only do we question the nature of literature and communication, but also we may begin to consider how we act as readers and interpreters. Certain modes of response are typical for different text types and we easily slip from one mode to another. While we may be deeply moved by an advertisement, for example, we know that we are also being asked to buy a product. Or when considering a work of literature, we are almost automatically being asked to think about larger meaning. The IB Language and Literature course is structured in a way to offer great freedom in construction. In this section we would like to give an example of a way in which your teacher might combine a variety of ideas in order to approach important conceptual questions in the area of investigation. The poem gives you a clear hint that we will be looking at texts that are somehow “wild” or different from what we would normally expect. But if you think about the meaning of the poem, you might notice something else. Maybe “The Weather” by Kenneth Goldsmith is somehow about “the wild”. In other words, by transcribing day after day of weather forecasts, Goldsmith is asking us to consider our relationship with the natural world, or the ways in which we try to systematize something that is uncontrollable or wild. It may also be a poem about the ways in which we sometimes take the surprise out of the wild or the ways in which, conversely, wild weather manages to occasionally fascinate us despite its daily presence. In this section, then, we will be trying to defamiliarize the familiar by looking both at texts that are themselves somehow wild and at the ways in which authors and creators engage with the natural environment or, in particular, with nature that we consider untamed.

Activity

1. This extract is identified as a poem. Is there any other way to know that this is a poem without being told that it is one? Does it matter?
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Readers, writers and texts
This section also provides an example of the ways in which global issues can be explored even as the focus of the teaching might be more related to style or structure. First, the texts are presented as means to consider the relationships among readers, writers and texts. Next, texts that are strange help us to consider the nature of communication. Finally, two clear “global issues” are raised in these texts: broadly, the nature and function of language in society and the ways in which texts engage with the environment. If a teacher were to create a unit like this, there would be many personal avenues of exploration for the portfolio. Ultimately, by considering texts and how they are implicated in, reflect, or refract anything to do with “the wild” you can think about the ways that any communicative act—whether aesthetic, social, or economic—both comments upon and is part of identity and culture.

Consider the wild
Look at this image from the popular children’s picture book Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak.

Activity

1. What is the impression given of the wild here?
2. In what ways is the wild here portrayed as realistic? Inviting? Terrifying? Funny?
3. Is this image unusual considering the audience? How would you argue this position?
4. Before moving on to the other passages and images in this section, how would you say you speak about or think about things that are “wild”? Is the wild untamed, natural and exciting? Or is the wild out of control and feared?

The wild as setting
While the poem on page 98 and the image from a picture book on page 100 both deal with nature, they are also, in their own ways, somewhat “wild” in relation to conventions that we associate with the genres; for example, the image might go against safer, more bucolic children’s book images. The poem clearly breaks many rules and even calls attention to the notion of poetry or art. The following passage from a short story by Henry Lawson uses the natural world in a relatively straightforward way. At the same time, the setting in a Lawson story can often be seen as a character in its own right. When reading the passage, consider not only the way the setting is described but also the rhetorical importance of the setting or nature. In other words, consider the ways in which setting is used as both an integral part of the meaning of the story, a way of communicating meaning, or the ways in which the story becomes—through the setting—a comment on “the wild”.

Draw a wire fence and a few ragged gums, and add some scattered sheep running away from the train. Then you’ll have the bush all along the New South Wales western line from Bathurst on.

The railway towns consist of a public house and a general store, with a square tank and a school-house on piles in the nearer distance. The tank stands at the end of the school and is not many times smaller than the building itself. It is safe to call the pub “The Railway Hotel,” and the store “The Railway Stores,” with an “s.” A couple of patient, ungroomed hacks are probably standing outside the pub, while their masters are inside having a drink—several drinks. Also it’s safe to draw a sundowner sitting listlessly on a bench on the veranda, reading the Bulletin. The Railway Stores seem to exist only in the shadow of the pub, and it is impossible to conceive either as being independent of the other. There is sometimes a small, oblong weather-board building—unpainted, and generally leaning in one of the eight possible directions, and perhaps with a twist in another—which, from its half-obliterated sign, seems to have started as a rival to the Railway Stores, but the shutters are up and the place empty.

The only town I saw that differed much from the above consisted of a box-bark humpy with a clay chimney, and a woman standing at the door throwing out the wash-up water.

By way of variety, the artist might make a water-colour sketch of a fettler’s tent on the line, with a billy hanging over the fire in front, and three fellters standing round filling their pipes.

Slop sac suits, red faces, and old-fashioned, flat-brimmed hats, with wire round the brims, begin to drop into the train on the other side of Bathurst; and here and there a hat with three inches of crape round the crown, which perhaps signifies death in the family at some remote date, and perhaps doesn’t. Sometimes, I believe, it only means grease under the band. I notice that when a bushman puts crape round his hat he generally leaves it there till the hat wears out, or another friend dies. In the latter case, he buys a new piece of crape. This
outward sign of bereavement usually has a jolly red face beneath it. Death is about the only cheerful thing in the bush.

We crossed the Macquarie—a narrow, muddy gutter with a dog swimming across, and three goats interested.

A little farther on we saw the first sundowner. He carried a Royal Alfred, and had a billy in one hand and a stick in the other. He was dressed in a tailcoat turned yellow, a print shirt, and a pair of moleskin trousers, with big square calico patches on the knees; and his old straw hat was covered with calico. Suddenly he slipped his swag, dropped his billy, and ran forward, boldly flourishing the stick. I thought that he was mad, and was about to attack the train, but he wasn’t; he was only killing a snake. I didn’t have time to see whether he cooked the snake or not—perhaps he only thought of Adam.

Somebody told me that the country was very dry on the other side of Nevertire. It is. I wouldn’t like to sit down on it anywhere. The least horrible spot in the bush, in a dry season, is where the bush isn’t—where it has been cleared away and a green crop is trying to grow. They talk of settling people on the land! Better settle in it. I’d rather settle on the water; at least, until some gigantic system of irrigation is perfected in the West.

From “In A Dry Season” in While the Billy Boils, by Henry Lawson (1896)
A poem

As we have seen, poetry functions somewhat differently from prose. While some narrative poems—poems that are clearly meant to develop a story—may use the typical elements of setting, poems that are more lyric, or based on the thought and emotions of a supposed speaker, only imply setting. Even if there is a setting in a poem or a backdrop to the general situation of the poem, the economy of many poems keeps description of setting to a minimum. The following poem could be read as a reflection on something from the wild: a bird recalled in the description of setting to a minimum. The following poem could be the general situation of the poem, the economy of many poems keeps

1. What is the general focus or nature of the reflections in the poem?
2. In what ways does the natural world form the base of this poem? In what ways does the natural world provide only a starting point for reflection?
3. Note the irregular length of the stanzas, more accurately referred to as “verse paragraphs” in a free verse poem without regular rhythm or structure. How has the author’s choice of structure influenced your understanding of the reflections?
4. The first use of “you” (line 6), could be somewhat confusing. Who is the “you” here? Who else could “you” be and does this affect our reading of the poem?

Imagery

All of the passages in this section—and probably all of the passages in the book—contain imagery. Images are probably one of the most important elements to consider in a text because the words on the page conjure images for us as we read. Imagery is quite a complex concept for its potential variety, but at its simplest, imagery refers to the presentation of the physical world in language. As we, generally, perceive the physical world through the five senses, imagery can take the form of taste, touch, sound, sight or smell.

- **Aural imagery** images that evoke sound
- **Tactile imagery** images that evoke physical touch
- **Visual imagery** images that evoke sight
- **Olfactory imagery** images that evoke smell
- **Gustatory imagery** images that evoke taste

Imagery can also occur in various forms. Most commonly, images appear as:

- **tied** an image representation commonly associated with a real-world phenomenon such as “It was a dark and stormy night.”
- **free** an image representation that is unique and based on free association rather than a more common association such as “The cricket ball was hit and moved with a pace like a fiery meteor hurling through space.”
- **literal** “The flames rose as high as the adjacent skyscrapers.”
- **figurative** “The bull danced around the ring, moving as though a dandelion spread by a gentle, invisible yet deliberate and thoughtful wind.”

Imagery, however, tends to serve a purpose in literature beyond merely representing the physical universe or physical phenomena. Though it may well be that imagery describes the physical world, it is likely that there will be an attendant intention. Among those that are the most common include:

- conveying a rhetorical pattern that appears repeatedly in a work
- conveying a psychological reality in which the work is either produced and/or narrated and indicating a deeper, figurative meaning (often as levels of allegory)
- reinforcing or contradicting that apparent meaning of a work, often creating a sense of irony, humour or farce
- producing emotive power with the use of familiar, sacred or confrontational images.
A poem in translation

In an interconnected world, communication among cultures with different languages is increasingly frequent and, it could be argued, matters more than at any time in history. With the rise of trade and travel has come a rise in the use of English as a common form of communication. English is the most commonly taught second language in the world. But while a Russian speaker, for example, might gain some common ground by communicating with Chinese business partners with a shared knowledge of English, what is lost in translation? Communication in any language is a form of translation from partially formulated ideas and emotions. What kinds of changes happen to our ideas and emotions when we leap to a different language? While translation is an issue throughout this course, the best way to demonstrate the perils in translation is through a comparison of translations of a poem. Poetry relies more obviously on sound and connotation than any other form of writing. Consider the similarities and differences—obvious and subtle—in the poems below.

The Panther

His look is from passing the bars become so tired that he no longer holds anything. He feels as if there are a thousand bars and behind a thousand bars, no world.

The soft gait of supple strong footsteps, that turns in the smallest circle, is like a dance of power around a middle, in the stunned a great will stands.

Only sometimes does the curtain push the pupil silently open. Then a picture goes in, goes through the limbs tense silence and stop being in the heart.


These translations call attention to the power of language, not just to the vagaries of translation. While each of these poems has the same “speaker” and expresses the same general concerns, the particular word choice (the diction), the choice of images, the rhythm and rhyme, ultimately affect the ideas or feelings.

1. Which poem works best? If you know German, which poem seems to be the best translation?
2. Are these different poems valuable or interesting in their own right regardless of their fidelity to the original?
3. Just as every communicative act is a choice to put certain words in a certain order, every translation is a reordering and a second set of choices. How does rhythm, rhyme, structure and word choice function in each version?
Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures hurl the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature’s watchmen—

links which connect the days of animated life.

When I return to my house I find that visitors have been there and left their cards, either a bunch of flowers, or a wreath of evergreen, or a name in pencil on a yellow walnut leaf or a chip. They who come rarely to the woods take some little piece of the forest into their hands to play with by the way, which they leave, either intentionally or accidentally. One has peeled a willow wand, woven it into a ring, and dropped it on my table. I could always tell if visitors had called in my absence, either by the bended twigs or grass, or the print of their shoes, and generally of what sex or age or quality they were by some slight trace left, as a flower dropped, or a bunch of grass plucked and thrown away, even as far off as the railroad, half a mile distant, or by the lingering odor of a cigar or pipe. Nay, I was frequently notified of the passage of a traveller along the highway sixty rods off by the scent of his pipe.

There is commonly sufficient space about us. Our horizon is never quite at our elbows. The thick wood is not just at our door, nor the pond, but somewhat is always clearing, familiar and worn by us, appropriated and fenced in some way, and reclaimed from Nature. For what reason have I this vast range and circuit, some square miles of unfrequented forest, for my privacy, abandoned to me by men? My nearest neighbor is a mile distant, and no house is visible from any place but the mill-tops within half a mile of my own. I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself; a distant view of the railroad where it touches the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland road on the other. But for the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the prairies. It is as much Asia or Africa as New England. I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself. At night there was never a traveller passed my house, or knocked at my door, more than if I were the first or last man; unless it were in the spring, when at long intervals some came from the village to fish for pouts—they plainly fished much more in the Walden Pond of their own natures, and baited their hooks with darkness—but they soon retreated, usually with light baskets, and left “the world to darkness and to me,” and the black kernel of the night was never profaned by any human neighborhood. I believe that men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced.

From Walden; or, Life in the Woods, by Henry David Thoreau (1854)

1.5 The Wild

Readers, writers and texts

The following three texts help us to consider the relationship between language and our natural environment. The essay, the memoir and a poetic speech below represent three distinct text types that provide an example of the ways in which authors (or producers) can shape ideas and communicate with a specific audience. All three texts deal with the human relationship with the natural world, but for different purposes and with different effects. Following on from a discussion of literature that can stretch the notion of genre or the importance of various literary features, it is worth considering the ways in which these works of non-fiction attempt to communicate ideas and emotions, influence readers (or receivers), or even use features that we normally consider to be elements of fiction to portray supposed facts.

The essay

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; the repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature’s watchmen—

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