

**ENGLISH HL 26 July 2025**

**GRADE 12 POETRY NOTES ON: Solitude**

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| **SOLITUDE ELLA WHEELER WILCOX** |

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| **SOLITUDE – ELLA WHEELER WILCOX**     1. Laugh, and the world laughs with you; 2. Weep, and you weep alone. 3. For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth, 4. But has trouble enough of its own. 5. Sing, and the hills will answer; 6. Sigh, it is lost on the air. 7. The echoes bound to a joyful sound, 8. But shrink from voicing care.      1. Rejoice, and men will seek you; 2. Grieve, and they turn and go. 3. They want full measure of all your pleasure, 4. But they do not need your woe. 5. Be glad, and your friends are many;   14 Be sad, and you lose them all.  15 There are none to decline your nectared wine,  16 But alone you must drink life's gall.    17 Feast, and your halls are crowded;   1. Fast, and the world goes by. 2. Succeed and give, and it helps you live, 3. But no man can help you die. 4. There is room in the halls of pleasure 5. For a long and lordly train, 6. But one by one we must all file on   24 Through the narrow aisles of pain. |

**DICTION**

***Bound***– big, bouncing movements

***Woe*** – Sorrow/distress

***Gall*** – Things that make things bitter

***Mirth*** - happiness

**BACKGROUND**

This poem, much like Wilcox’s other works, contains her observation about the world around her. Her interest in spiritualism reflects effectively in this poem.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote “Solitude” after she had travelled to Madison, Wisconsin, to attend the Governor's inaugural ball. On her way there, she sat opposite a young widow, who was dressed in black and crying. The poet sat with her and tried to comfort her for the rest of the journey. When they arrived at the ball, the poet was so depressed she could hardly enjoy the party. When she saw her own face in a mirror, Wilcox remembered the crying woman and wrote this poem, where she thinks about the world’s response to sadness.

**THE TITLE**

Solitude” means a lonely place/being alone or away from other people.

The tone of the title (“Solitude”) is not obvious. “Solitude” can imply a state of being alone by choice and is not automatically negative. It can also have connotations of isolation and loneliness.

**SUMMARY**

The speaker addresses the reader directly. She states certain universal truths – “laugh, and the world laughs with / Weep, and you weep alone”. The poem speaks of the universal human condition in sharing joy and ‘good times’ but that a person is alone/solitary in their tough times/sadness.

In the first stanza the speaker states that one must face one’s problems instead of seeking happiness through others.

**FORM/STRUCTURE**

This poem follows a strict structure. The three stanzas consist of 8 lines each and the same rhyming pattern is used throughout. The first two stanzas focus on attitude, behaviour and actions. The last stanza focuses on the end of one’s life and suggests a particular approach to deal with this inevitability.

**TITLE**

Single word title highlights the theme of the poem that we are all alone. Solitude – being alone. We are lonely on our journey of life.

**STANZA 1 LINES 1-2**

*Laugh, and the world laughs with you; / Weep, and you weep alone.*

*World* – synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa) for people.

The first line tells a reader that if one were to laugh then the world would *laugh with you*. Happiness within oneself creates happiness in others.

The second line adds a more complicated dimension to the relationship between humans and society. Here she describes the opposite emotion, sadness displayed through weeping. People do not flock to the side of someone who is upset, human beings are not attracted to negativity, perhaps for fear it too may be shared. Juxtaposition “laugh”/ “weep”

**LINES 3-4**

For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth, / *But has trouble enough of its own.*

*mirth* – laughter caused by happiness.

The poet argues that the earth (which is personified) has so much trouble and sadness that it has enough of its own almost as if by default the earth is sad. The earth seems so consumed with trouble that it is unable to help. It seems as if misery is a frequent occurrence whilst joy is short-lived. However, happiness *mirth* is rare, so the earth must *borrow* happiness from elsewhere. Wilcox implies that sadness is the natural state of the world.

Juxtaposition “sad” and “mirth” Internal rhyme is present in “earth” and “mirth”.

**LINES 5-8**

*Sing, and the hills will answer; / Sigh, it is lost on the air. / The echoes bound to a joyful sound, / But shrink from voicing care.*

Internal rhyme of “bound” and “sound”

Juxtaposition- “sing” and “sigh”

These lines convey the same idea as lines 1-4.

If you were to *“sing*” then the *“hills”* would *“answer.”* You will receive a response from the world or society, and happiness would be multiplied.

*Bound* – big, bouncing movements.

*echoes* – are personified as being happy, to bounce or skip in response to happy sounds, in contrast, if you were to *“Sigh”* (symbolic of problems) it would be *“lost on the air.”* “bound” seems to be a reaction to the “echo”. The sound and the emotion dissipate without anyone acknowledging, or certainly repeating it.

*shrink* – pull back

*shrink from voicing care* – to avoid expressing sympathy - the world will not share your problems/issues/cares

The first stanza concludes with the two emotions being translated into sounds. The sound of singing will “bound” like a joyful echo while the sigh will be ignored.

Wilcox implies that people share joy happily but prefer that suffering is not shared.

**STANZA 2 LINES 9-12**

*Rejoice, and men will seek you; / Grieve, and they turn and go. / They want full measure of all your pleasure, / But they do not need your woe.*

“They” – exclusive pronoun that does not include the speaker/reader. Emphasises how people/world want nothing to do with your suffering.

The speaker presents another five statements that outline how the world at large reacts to positivity and negativity. The first line says that if you rejoice then others will *“seek you”* out and want to spend time with you.

*full measure* – complete/all

She once again presents a contrast, that if you *“Grieve”* then the same people will *“turn and go.”* These people do not want “your woe” but are happy to take on “your pleasure.”

**LINES 13-16**

*Be glad, and your friends are many; / Be sad, and you lose them all. / There are none to decline your nectared wine, / But alone you must drink life's gall.*

NB -Anaphora

Second person pronoun - you

The speaker gives the reader some advice in the next lines that if you want to have friends, then you need to be *“glad.”* If you are not, then you are going to *“lose them all.”*

*life’s gall* – sadness, poverty, loneliness – all things that make us bitter.

In the last two lines of this stanza, happiness is compared to *“nectared wine*” and sadness is compared to *“life’s gall”.* The poet uses this extended metaphor to explain how everyone wants to share as much of a person’s happiness as possible (a *“full measure”* of “*nectared wine”)* but they will be forced to experience their sadness *(“life’s gall”)* alone.

**STANZA 3 LINES 17-18**

*Feast, and your halls are crowded; / Fast, and the world goes by.*

The speaker presents her final set of comparisons between a happy life and a sad one and the reactions they provoke. She uses another comparison: a *feast* (celebration) can bring people together.

*halls are crowded* – emphasises that everyone will join in the celebrations.

*Fast* – fasting is private. People may not be aware that you are fasting, therefore the whole world would not take notice or join you.

These two examples are metaphors for everyday life. Welcoming community, companionship, and happiness are going to inspire even more of the same. The poet argues that if you do not participate in life and happiness (if you *“fast”),* people will ignore you, they will not want to spend time with you. *(“Fast, and the world goes by”).*

**LINES 19-20**

*Succeed and give, and it helps you live, / But no man can help you die.*

The speaker refers to life and death and the way that humans deal with pain.

If you are successful and give generously to others (not only material goods, but also if you give of yourself emotionally), you will live a good life *(“it helps you live”).*

*no man* – nobody. The poet says that literally, we all go through the process of death alone, but also implies that withdrawing from others is a metaphorical death and one that we always go through alone. Death is a solitary venture.

**LINES 21-21**

*There is room in the halls of pleasure / For a long and lordly train, / But one by one we must all file on / Through the narrow aisles of pain.*

*the halls of pleasure* – metaphorically, the spaces in your life that are filled with joy and happiness. *a large and lordly train* – the procession of people that follow an aristocrat or royalty. “But” introduces a change – acceptance of our fate.

“one by one” – emphasises the theme of solitude.

Happiness is metaphorically compared to a house with big rooms *(“roomy halls”)* that can hold many guests *(“a large and lordly train”),* where people enjoy having parties *(“halls of pleasure”)* while pain is compared to a *“narrow aisle”* which implies a corridor that people have to move through alone as it is small and restrictive. There is no one to share your pain/ your path to death.

In these lines, the poet says that happy people attract others and have large and loyal groups of followers. This contrasts with the next two lines.

*file on* – walk into a place in a line, one behind the other. *aisles* – a narrow passage between rows of seats.

The poet describes pain as a “narrow” aisle. This metaphor implies that people can only survive pain on their own. Others can only watch them, but cannot experience their pain with them.

*we must all* – implies that everyone will suffer and that the journey through pain is ultimately one that everyone will have to make on their own.

**THEMES**

* **Happiness/Pain** – throughout the poem the speaker states that one must face one’s problems head-on and not seek comfort in others in lieu of addressing one’s problems/issues. She states that we cannot run from our problems forever.
* **Individual vs outside world** – the relationship between these two concepts is clear in this poem. This poem acts as a ‘map’ to the individual and how to create your own happiness and face the realities of the world. Wilcox makes it clear that she believes that all people exist in a state of solitude. Life needs to be tackled with practicality and self-reliance.

* This poem is about **how people respond to the emotional state of others**: happy people tend to attract the company and friendship of many others; sad people tend to become isolated and lonely because people tend to shy away from negative emotions.

* In the final stanza, the poet explains how **everyone must ultimately go through pain and suffering alone** - although others can bear witness, this experience is inevitably a solitary one. The poet is not necessarily saying that people are selfish - just that a person can observe others’ deepest feelings but cannot actually experience them.

Irony – Simple level – We are all alone in our suffering/ grief but on a complex level – there is a commonality in a sense that every person has to endure this so we are united on that common ground.

**TONE**

• On the whole, the tone is **melancholy/sad/depressed**. Although the poet reminds us that happiness is possible (this is the connotations of words and phrases like “laugh”, “sing”, “rejoice”, “nectared wine” and “halls of pleasure”) the poet contrasts these words and phrases with their opposites (“weep”, “sigh”, “be sad”, “life’s gall” and “narrow aisles of pain”.

**MOOD**

* **Solemn**
* **Thought-provoking**

**QUESTION 1 – ESSAY QUESTION**

*The poem essentially declares that while a negative attitude repulses people, a positive one attracts them.* In an essay describe how the speaker reinforces the above message in the poem. Your response should take the form of a well-constructed essay of 250–300 words (about ONE page). (10)

**Suggested answers to Essay question.**

Use the following points, among others, as a guideline to answering this question.

* In 'Solitude' by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, the speaker describes the connection between one's outlook on life and the friends and community one attracts. The speaker describes how people like to seek happiness through other people rather than facing their problems alone.
* The title of the poem ‘Solitude’ refers to the mental and physical state of humans who distance themselves from those who seek happiness instead of being morose (‘voicing care’). The idea that human beings are not attracted to negativity is reiterated in the poem.
* In the first stanza, Wilcox compares happiness (and how the world will rejoice with you) and sadness (and how sometimes you must face this alone).
* The speaker emphasises the point that people seek pleasure and joy and they do not want to be burdened by the suffering of others. The idea that happiness will attract more happiness and sorrow will take us away from enjoying happy moments is introduced in line 1 (‘Laugh and the world laughs with you’). This idea is repeated throughout the poem e.g. ‘Rejoice, and men will seek you’ (line 9).
* The contradictory reactions of people to both positive actions and negative reactions are highlighted. There is a distinct pattern that emerges in the poem.
* The speaker indicates that the world does not have a well of happiness to draw from (‘sad old earth’). The personification of the earth as being sad effectively sums up the plight of people who are burdened by issues that make them sad and lonely.
* The use of hyperbole (‘Sing, and the hills will answer’) emphasises the idea if you express happiness it will be reciprocated (returned) to you. This is in direct contrast to the sadness (‘sigh’) that is ‘lost in the air’ or repels others.
* The theme that one cannot run from one’s problems forever and seek happiness through others is highlighted.
* The poem is abundant in contrasting ideas. If you laugh, sing, rejoice, or feast, the world will be drawn to you. If you weep, sigh, fast, or grieve, the world will abandon you. After all, in the end, “one by one we must all file on.” The poet repeats the idea that happiness will attract more happiness and sorrow will take us away from enjoying happy moments. Finally, it will make us lonely where we will have to enjoy our own company. A complaining man or sad person will be forced to live his life in loneliness. There will not be anyone to share his sorrow. Wilcox clarifies this idea by saying that many will come to drink from our

“nectared” wine while no one will show his willingness to share the bitter taste of our life.

* “Solitude” suggests that although we must bear our hardships alone, we should understand that happiness and grief are part of the human condition and we should remain resilient.

**Questions and Answers**

**Solitude Ella Wheeler Wilcox**

1. Comment on the personification in stanza 1. (3)

*(****The world ‘laughs’ – when you are happy the world around you is happy. The earth also “borrows” mirth – joy/ humour – there are enough sadness /problems. The hills “answer” your happiness – literally an echo and figuratively like the earth “laughing” with you. NOT AT YOU! The echoes “shrink” back from issues/problems/ worries.)***

1. Describe the reaction of the ‘echoes’ (line 7) to the prompts given. (2)

*(****In reaction to the ‘joyful sound’ the echoes will repeat the sound eagerly. However, there will be no reaction is the sound is not happy – expression of ‘care’, concern or worry.)***

1. What does “shrink” mean as used in line 8? (2)

***(Pull back – the world will not share your problems/issues/cares.)***

1. Suggest a possible example of “life’s gall”. (2)

***(Sadness, poverty, loneliness – all things that make us bitter.)***

1. Why does the speaker suggest that “pain” is travelled through “narrow aisles”? (2)

***(Narrow aisles are confined – not enough space for more than one person at a time. When we suffer, we do so alone. We must learn to create our own happiness.***

1. Paraphrase and explain the line: “Succeed and give, and it helps you live.”(3)

***(A person who succeeds in life and then shares his good fortune with others, will derive must joy from the act of giving. They will have a more rewarding life. Their life will be better.)***

1. Discuss the effectiveness of the title of the poem in relation to its contents. (3)

***(Although solitude can mean loneliness, it is not always a bad thing. However, as made clear in this poem, people will only be with you if you are happy. We are alone in our sorrows and misfortunes. We also die alone – solitary/ in solitude. An appropriate title. Solitude is a choice. Unhappiness/loneliness is not a choice.)***

1. Is the speaker in this overly cynical? Discuss your opinion. (3)

***(I believe so – not all people are as ‘mean’ and uncaring as she states. Think of your own best friend – there for you in good times and bad??)***

1. Would “Loneliness” have been a better title for the poem? Discuss your answer and make reference to the connotations/denotations of both words (solitude and loneliness) in your answer. (3)

***(Perhaps a better choice. Loneliness is not a choice, just like to person would CHOOSE to be left alone in their worst times. Solitude is a chosen state. Not necessarily a bad thing.)***