Traveling through the Dark

SUMMARY

The speaker describes driving through the night and finding a dead deer on the side of the road that runs along the Wilson River in Oregon. Normally, the speaker says, the best thing to do in these situations is to roll the deer off the road and into the canyon below; since the road is so narrow, the deer's body would create a dangerous obstacle that would force other drivers to swerve and potentially get killed themselves.

The speaker trudged behind the car, its taillights illuminating the dark night, and stood next to the unmoving mass of the dead deer, which seemed to have been killed recently. The doe's body was already stiff with rigor mortis and beginning to cool. Upon dragging her off the road, the speaker noticed that her stomach was swollen.

Upon touching the doe's warm side, the speaker realized why this was the case: she was pregnant, a living fawn still insider her and waiting to be born—something that would never happen. Standing on the side of the mountain road, the speaker paused, unsure of what to do.

The car beamed its dim parking lights into the night before it, while its engine growled gently beneath the hood. The speaker stood in the car's warm exhaust, which glowed red in the glare of the taillights. The speaker, the car, the doe, and the unborn fawn were surrounded by a silence so deep it felt like nature itself was listening to them.

The speaker thought about everyone involved in this incident. This was the speaker's only form of hesitation before pushing the doe and its fawn off the edge of the road and into the river below.

THEMES

DEATH AND MORALITY

"Traveling through the Dark" is a poem about coming face to face with death. The speaker is faced with a no-win situation, understanding that moving the dead doe's body out of the road will potentially save other drivers, but also that doing so will kill her unborn fawn. Death is often unfair and inevitable, the poem thus implies, with the speaker deciding that the best thing to do in this situation is just to limit death's reach as much as possible.

Confronted with the body of the dead doe, the speaker fears that leaving it on the road will "make more dead." Despite not creating this situation in the first place, the speaker clearly feels a sense of moral responsibility when it comes to keeping the road safe. The speaker thus makes a calculated attempt to limit suffering, deciding to move the doe to save other drivers—despite the fact that doing so will guarantee the unborn fawn's death.

This decision is understandable; the fawn is doomed regardless of what the speaker does. Even if the speaker attempted a heroic rescue, it's unlikely the fawn would survive without its mother. Yet despite seeming like the right thing to do, this doesn't make going through with this plan any easier. Pushing the doe into the river effectively makes the speaker an active participant in the fawn's death rather than an innocent bystander. The fawn would have died anyway, but now the speaker is the one killing it.

Thus, while it's perhaps simple enough to prioritize human life *in theory*, the poem implies that actually choosing one life over another isn't all that easy. The deer and her unborn baby aren't just numbers in a calculation; life and death aren't abstract philosophical concepts for the speaker in this moment, and the speaker realizes that it's not always possible to make clear-cut moral choices when it comes to mortality.

Faced with such a dilemma, the speaker "hesitates." The poem's sudden focus on the ominous, waiting car implies that the speaker is tempted to drive off and leave the deer right where she is—effectively relinquishing all responsibility for the situation and leaving it to whoever is unlucky enough to drive along next.

Yet this wavering—this "swerving"—lasts only a moment. The speaker ultimately pushes the deer "into the river," which can be read both as a choice to protect other drivers, and, perhaps, a means of simply getting this terrible situation over with and moving on. The poem ends on a note of sadness, with the speaker seemingly not feeling all that good about doing what was right.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

"Traveling through the Dark" explores the conflict between humanity and the natural world, and specifically meditates on the destructive potential of technology. The doe was presumably killed in a hit-and-run, with the driver who struck her not even bothering to move her body. Through this incident, the poem highlights technology's devastating effect on nature, as well as humanity's seeming indifference toward its role in this violence and destruction.

The doe's death is the direct result of technology butting up against the natural world. She would have been spared her gruesome fate had society not intruded on her habitat in the first place by constructing this road. And when the speaker says, "It is usually best to roll them into the canyon," readers sense that it's extremely common to find dead animals like this. This implies how little human society seems to care about its impact on nature, seeing dead animals in the road as a mere inconvenience rather than a call to change its ways.

Although society has intruded upon the "wilderness"—the doe's home—the dead doe is the one that now seems out of place. The speaker's decision to move her is based on the possibility that she'll block traffic and cause "more death"—*human* death, to be specific. This makes it seem as if the doe has encroached upon the human world when in reality it's the other way around: people have interfered with nature, making it harder for animals like the doe to live in peace.

The poem implies that humanity has prioritized technology and convenience over all else. In keeping with this mindset, the speaker at first seems rather emotionless while trying to remove the doe from the road, treating it like nothing more than a roadblock, a disruption to the smooth flow of society. But feeling the warmth of the fawn in the doe's stomach is a reminder that she, too, was once a living being—a mother, no less—and this forces a reconsideration of the speaker's own place in the world.

The speaker suddenly feels "the wilderness" listening—watching, and perhaps judging, what's happening—and seems to briefly acknowledge that humanity is merely one small part of a much larger world. That the speaker still pushes the doe off the ledge might imply that it's too late for people to change their ways, but for a moment, at least, the poem pushes readers to reflect upon society's destructive and careless imposition on nature.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 13-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Traveling through the ...
... make more dead.

The poem's starts by setting the scene. It's a dark night, and the speaker finds a dead deer while driving down on a narrow road. The word "found" is important here, since it clarifies that the speaker wasn't the one to hit and kill the deer. Some other driver, it seems, struck the deer and didn't stick around to move it off the road. This carelessness, in turn, has created a dangerous situation for other drivers.

The speaker recognizes that the previous driver's decision to leave the deer on the road was irresponsible, saying, "It is usually best to roll them into the canyon." The word "usually" suggests that the speaker has encountered this situation before; it's apparently pretty common to find dead animals on the road that runs along the Wilson River.

This can be a very dangerous, the speaker indicates, since the road is "narrow" and the obstacle created by a dead deer's body could cause other drivers to "swerve" off the pavement—something that could "make more dead." In other words, the speaker worries that leaving the deer's body on the road might result in deadly car accidents.

The desire to avoid "mak[ing] more dead" suggests that the speaker feels responsible for other people's safety, wanting to decrease the amount of death in the world. This sets the stage for the rest of the poem, in which the speaker moves the deer in an attempt to reduce harm and loss—something that seems straightforward and easy at first but later becomes morally complex.

Alliteration and assonance evoke the imagery of these lines. The heavy /d/ sound in "deer / dead" places thudding emphasis on the phrase. The assonance of "dead on the edge" draws yet more attention to this image, making it hard for readers to overlook the image of a dead deer lying on the "edge" of a road.

Alliteration reappears at the end of line 4, when the speaker repeats the /m/ sound:

> [...] to swerve might make more dead.

This alliteration again reflects the line's content: that flurry of /m/ sounds suggests the increase in death that will result if the speaker doesn't move the deer.

LINES 5-8

By glow of ...
... in the belly.

The speaker steps out of the car to move the deer and discovers that she's a doe (a name for a female deer) and that she died recently. That the speaker starts using female pronouns from here on out subtly reflects the idea that this deer was a living, breathing creature—an individual being with value, rather than an "it."

The "tail-light" of the speaker's car illuminates the scene. There is some subtle juxtaposition between the description of the car's "glow" and the description of the doe as a "heap." The word "heap" calls to mind a large, inert pile of inanimate material. The word "glow," on the other hand, is sometimes used to describe people who have a certain radiance that indicates warmth and good health. Human technology and nature therefore seem to swap places, as the car seems more

alive than the doe, which lies dead and "almost cold" in the road.

The doe being "stiffened" refers to the effects of rigor mortis, when the body becomes rigid a few hours after death. This, combined with the image of the speaker "dragg[ing]" the animal's body away is intentionally disturbing; the speaker seems to be treating all this very nonchalantly, without any apparent sadness or emotion because this happens all the time.

The caesura in line 8, however, signals a turning point in the poem, as the speaker begins to examine the doe more carefully:

> I dragged her off; || she was large in the belly.

This clear pause marks a shift away from the rote, mindless task of moving the doe. The speaker becomes slightly more thoughtful and observant, realizing that the doe's stomach is unusually large. Instead of simply viewing the dead animal as an inanimate piece of flesh, the speaker begins to consider her more carefully. The size of the doe's belly implies that she was pregnant when it died—a fact that will be confirmed in the next stanza.

The /st/ sound appears as alliteration and consonance throughout this stanza:

> [...] I **st**umbled back of the car
> and **st**ood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
> she had **st**iffened already, almo**st** cold.

This hissing sibilance adds a hush to the scene, while the sharp /t/ sounds feel a bit sinister or ominous.

LINES 9-12

My fingers touching ...
... road I hesitated.

The speaker confirms what the last stanza hinted at: the doe was pregnant at the time of her death. Whereas the speaker previously noted that the doe was "almost cold," now the speaker says that her side is "warm." This makes the doe seem less like a mere "heap" of unmoving flesh and reminds that speaker she was once a living being.

This poses a problem for the speaker. The decision to push the doe into the canyon was easy at first, since the speaker saw this as a way of ensuring that the animal's body wouldn't cause an accident and "make more dead." Now, though, the speaker realizes that the fawn inside the dead doe's belly is "alive," meaning that pushing the doe into the canyon would ensure the unborn fawn's death.

Of course, the speaker has already decided that the fawn is "never to be born" regardless; no matter what the speaker does, without a mother, this fawn is doomed. And yet, the speaker "hesitate[s]" on the side of the road. This hesitation implies that the speaker suddenly feels partially responsible for the fawn's unfortunate fate. There is nothing the speaker can do to avoid death in this situation—either the speaker leaves the doe and risks endangering human lives, or the speaker sacrifices the fawn by kicking the doe into the canyon.

The speaker uses a number of caesuras in this stanza, especially in lines 10 and 11:

> her side was warm; || her fawn lay there waiting,
> alive, || still, || never to be born.

These pauses slow down the pace of the poem, giving the speaker's words a contemplative and melancholy feel. The caesuras also isolate the word "still," which the speaker uses to highlight the fact that, despite its mother's death, the fawn is *still* alive.

The word also brings to mind the term "stillborn," which refers to infants that have died in the womb. According to the speaker, the fawn is alive inside the doe's belly, but it will never make its way into the world. It is therefore not "stillborn," but simply "still" and "never to be born." The caesuras surrounding the word help spotlight this unsettling fact, inviting readers to consider the odd way that the fawn exists between life and death.

LINES 13-16

The car aimed ...
... the wilderness listen.

After discovering that the dead doe was pregnant upon her death, the speaker pauses, suddenly unsure of what to do. As the speaker hesitates and looks at the immediate surroundings, the poem once again juxtaposes the car and the natural world.

The car's light's are "aimed ahead," a phrase that evokes the way the beams of light pierce through the darkness and also calls to mind the "aiming" done in hunting. The car's lights seem threatening and out of sync with the mountainous surroundings.

However, the speaker also notices some similarities between the car and the natural world. In line 14, for instance, the speaker describes the car as though it were an animal, saying:

> under the hood purred the steady engine.

One definition of the word "purred" has to do with the low rumbling sound an engine makes, but the most common use of the word describes the vibrating sound cats make when they're content. The car thus seems like a powerful, growling beast ready to roar off into the darkness—perhaps to hunt deer.

The speaker then says, "I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red." Not only is the exhaust turning a blood-like color that reminds readers of its violent potential, but it's also "warm," suggesting that it's just as alive as the unborn fawn.

Similarly, the car's engine and the fawn have quite a bit in common, since both things hum with life even though they're trapped inside lifeless bodies.

Regardless of the similarities between the car and the fawn, the fact remains that the car symbolizes human technology's intrusion upon the natural world. Line 16 confirms this idea, as the speaker says, "around our group I could hear the wilderness listen." The "group" mentioned here consists of the speaker, the fawn, the unborn doe, and the prattling car. Beyond this group, the wide-open wilderness is so silent that the speaker feels like it's actually listening in on what's happening.

Personifying the wilderness like this suggests that it's actively waiting to see what the speaker will do. No longer is nature a silent, lifeless entity that human beings are free to destroy with impunity, this moment suggests; it's a vast world filled with life, and the speaker has ventured into its territory. Note how the consonance, sibilance, and assonance of "wilderness listen" make the phrase stick out to readers' ears. That sibilance especially creates a quiet, potentially sinister hiss.

Also note the assonance of the /eh/ sound in lines 13 through 15:

> The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
> under the hood purred the steady engine.
> I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;

In combination with the internal rhyme between "hood" and "stood," this assonance lends a sense of cohesion to this stanza while also giving the language a pleasant and musical effect. This makes the words sound poetic and well-controlled, conveying a contemplative mood as the speaker takes in the surroundings and considers what to do with the doe.

LINES 17-18

I thought hard ...
... into the river.

The speaker takes a moment to think about everyone involved in this situation. The phrase "I thought hard for us all" implies that the speaker doesn't just think about the dead doe and its fawn, but also about the speaker's *own* involvement in this unsettling sequence of events.

The speaker thinks "hard" about this because the speaker has realized that it's difficult to make clear-cut choices when dealing with death and suffering. Although people might like to think that it's simple enough to make decisions based on whatever will cause the least harm, the speaker has discovered that even this approach sometimes means having to confront death in some way.

At the same time, though, the speaker knows—and has known all along—that there's no way to save the fawn's life. Immediately after discovering the fawn, the speaker noted that it was "never to be born." It has been doomed from the start, yet this doesn't make it easy for the speaker to kick the doe into the canyon. Perhaps this is because doing so would most likely make the speaker feel like an active participant in the fawn's demise. Still, the fact remains that it would be impossible for the speaker to save the fawn's life.

This impossibility is why the speaker finally pushes the doe "over the edge into the river." Although the thought of contributing to the fawn's death unsettles the speaker, this doesn't change the fact that pushing the doe off the road will likely save more lives than it will harm, since it will decrease the likelihood of other drivers getting into fatal accidents.

The phrase "my only swerving" frames the speaker's thought process as a misstep or a weakness of some sort. The implication here is that thinking too hard about the unborn fawn's misfortune might keep the speaker from doing what's necessary; it might stop the speaker from moving the doe and, in doing so, saving human lives.

The phrase "my only swerving" also metaphorically links the speaker's indecision to the image of cars "swerv[ing]" around the doe's body—something the speaker has already said would only "make more dead." Pausing to empathize with the unborn fawn, then, is a mistake because it interferes with the speaker's apparently rational resolve to save more lives overall. But the speaker doesn't allow this hesitation to interfere *too* much, finally deciding not to dwell any longer on the fawn's misfortune, which cannot be helped.

All the other stanzas are quatrains, but this stanza is a couplet, making it feel terse and pragmatic. Instead of thinking philosophically about the role the speaker will play in the fawn's death, the speaker suddenly becomes unsentimental about the situation, making the difficult but logical decision to push the doe off the edge. The shorter stanza length accentuates this change of heart, suggesting that the speaker has decided once and for all that—since nothing could possibly save the fawn—it would be futile to dwell any longer on the matter.

SYMBOLS

THE CAR

The speaker's car in the poem symbolizes technology as well human civilianization more broadly.

This car comes across as totally out of place in its surroundings. In fact, it seems almost demonic. Its parking lights are "aimed ahead," glaring into the darkness and calling to mind the way a hunter aims at their prey. Its engine "purr[s]" like some kind of powerful animal, while the fumes from its exhaust pipe look red in the "glow" of the taillights. All of these details make it clear that the car starkly contrasts with its peaceful natural surroundings, in turn reflecting the separation between

humanity and the natural world.

Although the speaker describes the car in animalistic terms, the fact that it seems alive only serves to further contrast it with the doe's cold, stiff body—reminding readers that the doe is dead because it was (presumably) hit by another car. While not explicitly mentioned in the poem, that collision symbolizes a clash between the human and the natural world, with humanity leaving death and destruction in its wake.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car"
- **Lines 13-15:** "The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights; / under the hood purred the steady engine. / I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration to add emphasis to certain words. Take the first two lines:

> Traveling through the dark I found a deer
> dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.

The heavy /d/ sound spotlights the words "dark," "deer," and "dead," drawing attention to the scene that sets the poem in motion. Later, the alliteration of the /r/ sound in "River road" creates an interesting sonic connection between two things that are treated as totally incompatible in the poem: nature (represented by "River") and technology (represented by "road"). This sound then gets picked up by "roll" in the next line, subtly suggesting that the clash between nature and technology results in death.

Another prominent instance of alliteration appears in line 4, when the speaker leans on the /m/ sound:

> that road is narrow; to swerve might make more
> dead.

This once again intensifies the speaker's language, all those /m/ sounds calling attention to the idea that leaving the doe on the road could lead to many more deaths.

Other instances of alliteration in the poem include the repetition of the /l/ and /s/ sounds in lines 13 through 15:

> [...] lowered parking lights;
> under the hood purred the steady engine.
> I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning read;

The /l/ sound accentuates the words "lowered" and "lights," inviting readers to picture the glow of the car's headlights cutting through dark surroundings. The sibilant /s/, on the other hand, gives this section a subtle hissing sound that evokes the (slightly sinister) hush of the dark night.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dark"
- **Lines 1-2:** "deer / dead"
- **Line 2:** "River road"
- **Line 3:** "roll"
- **Line 4:** "might make more"
- **Line 5:** "stumbled"
- **Line 6:** "stood"
- **Line 7:** "stiffened," "already, almost"
- **Line 10:** "was warm," "waiting"
- **Lines 11-12:** "be born. / Beside"
- **Line 13:** "lowered," "lights"
- **Line 14:** "steady"
- **Line 15:** "stood"

CONSONANCE

Consonance in "Traveling through the Dark" makes the language sound rich and musical while also spotlighting important words and phrases. One of the most noticeable moments of consonance comes in the first two lines, which feature the /r/ and /d/ sounds:

> Traveling through the dark I found a deer
> dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.

The /d/ sound in these opening lines creates a strong, rhythmic beat, while the /r/ sound adds a subtle growl. Together, these sounds pull readers into the scene at hand, with phrases like "found a deer / dead"drawing attention to the image of a dead deer lying in the road.

The poem also contains moments of sibilance. For example, consider the phrase "wilderness listen." The soft /s/ sounds here reflect the nighttime atmosphere—so quiet and still that the speaker feels like the natural world itself is listening in. Sibilance also evokes the hissing of a snake, perhaps suggesting that this "wilderness" isn't all that welcoming to intruders like the speaker.

Lines 5-7 feature a slew of /t/, /k/, and /s/ sounds that bring the imagery at hand to life:

> [...] tail-light I stumbled back of the car
> and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
> she had stiffened already, almost cold.

These sounds stop air in their tracks, suggesting the stiffness

and lifelessness of the dear.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Traveling through," "dark," "found," "deer"
- **Line 2:** "dead," "River road"
- **Line 3:** "roll"
- **Line 4:** "road," "narrow," "swerve," "might make more"
- **Line 5:** "glow," "tail-light," "stumbled back," "car"
- **Line 6:** "stood," "doe," "recent," "killing"
- **Line 7:** "stiffened," "already, almost," "cold"
- **Line 8:** "dragged"
- **Line 10:** "was warm," "waiting"
- **Line 11:** "alive, still"
- **Lines 11-12:** "be born. / Beside"
- **Line 13:** "lowered," "parking," "lights"
- **Line 14:** "under," "hood," "purred," "steady"
- **Line 15:** "stood," "glare," "exhaust," "turning"
- **Lines 15-16:** "red; / around our group"
- **Line 16:** "wilderness," "listen"
- **Line 17:** "us," "all," "only," "swerving"

IMAGERY

The speaker uses imagery to vividly evoke the experience of finding a dead doe on a dark road at night. In the very first line, the speaker sets the scene, saying, "Traveling through the dark I found a deer." This invites readers to imagine what it would feel like to drive through blackness and then suddenly come upon an animal in the road.

The second stanza also uses visual imagery to describe the scene, as the speaker gets out and, by the "glow" of the car's "tail-light," goes to stand next to the dead doe. Describing the doe herself, the speaker metaphorically compares the animal to a "heap"—a word that refers to a disorderly pile. Comparing the doe's body to a "heap" suggests that she's quite large, but it also emphasizes the fact that the doe is dead, since heaps are inanimate. To emphasize this point, the speaker goes on to say that the doe's body is "stiff[]" and "cold," drawing on more sensory details that help readers imagine what it would be like to touch the animal's lifeless body.

Upon discovering the fawn in the doe's belly, the speaker again uses touch-related imagery, this time saying that the doe's side is "warm." This creates juxtaposition between the dead doe and the living fawn, despite the fact that the fawn is *inside* the doe. The speaker's use of imagery helps accentuate this contrast.

The speaker's depiction of the car is also full of imagery, as the speaker notes its "lowered parking lights" and the soft "purr[ing]" sound that the engine makes. Standing behind the car, the speaker is surrounded by exhaust, which is not only lit red from the taillights, but also "warm." All of these descriptions makes the car seem like a living thing: the engine growls like some kind of large cat, and the exhaust seems to breathe out of the car like a big exhalation.

Finally, the speaker suggests that the surrounding natural world is so silent that it feels like the "wilderness" is "listen[ing]" for what will happen next. By hinting at this silence, the speaker once again uses imagery as a way of creating juxtaposition, this time setting the noise of the growling engine against the quiet backdrop of nature.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Traveling through the dark I found a deer / dead on the edge of the Wilson River road."
- **Line 4:** "that road is narrow"
- **Line 5:** "By glow of the tail-light"
- **Line 7:** "she had stiffened already, almost cold"
- **Line 8:** "she was large in the belly."
- **Line 10:** "her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,"
- **Lines 13-16:** "The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights; / under the hood purred the steady engine. / I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red; / around our group I could hear the wilderness listen."

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker juxtaposes the doe's dead body with the unborn fawn inside her stomach, using sensory details to highlight that the fawn is still "alive" even though its mother has died. Upon first touching the doe, the speaker describes her as "almost cold"—an unsurprising description of a corpse. However, the speaker then touches a "warm" spot on the doe's body and realizes that there's a fawn inside. These contrasting feelings ("warm" and "cold") call attention to the unsettling idea that unborn babies can—in certain contexts—survive inside a womb for a short time even after their mother has died.

The description of the car in the third stanza ("The car [...] wilderness listen") also features juxtaposition. The speaker plays with the contrast between nature and human technology, calling attention to the way the car's lights disrupt the night's darkness. The sound of the car's engine also contrasts with the silence of nature. This makes the car seem out of place in this scene, presenting it as something that has intruded upon the natural world.

Considering that a car was (presumably) responsible for the doe's death, this characterization makes sense; it reflects the idea that technology has had a harmful impact on the surrounding wilderness. Juxtaposition thus enables the speaker to emphasize the destructive relationship between human technology and the rest of the world.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "she had stiffened already, almost cold."
- **Line 10:** "her side was warm"

- **Lines 13-16:** "The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights; / under the hood purred the steady engine. / I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red; / around our group I could hear the wilderness listen."

ASSONANCE

Assonance in "Traveling through the Dark" adds emphasis to certain words and phrases. For example, consider the way that the short /eh/ sound repeats in line 2:

> dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.

This /eh/ sound spotlights the words "dead" and "edge," making the image of the dead doe's body on the side of the road stand out all the more starkly for the reader. A similar effect appears in line 6, when the speaker uses the assonant /ee/ sound:

> and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;

Assonance also simply makes the poem sound more musical here and elsewhere, elevating the speaker's language ever so slightly. For more examples of assonance, look to moments such as "lay there waiting" in line 10, "steady engine" in line 14, and "wilderness listen" in line 16. Although these moments are brief, they still make the poem feel lyrical and reflective. The poem is relatively conversational and informal, but the gentle rhythm of assonance throughout reminds readers that this is still a *poem*—that the ideas and images here speak to broader ideas about life, death, humanity, and the natural world.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "dead," "edge"
- **Line 4:** "road," "narrow"
- **Line 6:** "heap," "recent," "killing"
- **Line 7:** "stiffened," "already," "almost cold"
- **Line 9:** "me," "reason"
- **Line 10:** "lay," "waiting"
- **Line 14:** "under," "hood," "purred," "steady engine"
- **Line 15:** "stood"
- **Line 16:** "around our," "wilderness listen"

CAESURA

The caesuras slow the poem down, creating a contemplative and somewhat melancholy feel to the speaker's description of this fateful evening. For example, take line 6, when the speaker gets out of the car and stands next to the dead doe:

> and stood by the heap, || a doe, || a recent killing;

The caesuras around the words "a doe" break up this line, fragmenting it in a way that disrupts the flow of the speaker's language. This disruption puts emphasis on the image of the dead doe. It also makes the language seem halting and unsettled, hinting at the fact that the sight of the dead animal has disturbed the speaker.

Caesuras similarly convey the speaker's discomfort in lines 10 and 11, when the speaker realizes that there's an unborn fawn inside the doe's womb:

> her side was warm; || her fawn lay there waiting,
> alive, || still, || never to be born.

The first caesura in this section calls attention to the speaker's moment of realization—the moment in which it becomes clear that there's a fawn inside the doe's belly. The two caesuras in line 11 create a pensive quality that reflects the speaker's sadness and subsequent struggle to come to terms with the fact that, although the fawn has survived its mother's death, it will "never be born."

In the poem's concluding couplet, the speaker uses a final caesura:

> I thought hard for us all— || my only swerving—,
> then pushed her over the edge into the river.

This pause adds intensity to the poem's ending, once more slowing the pace. The presence of caesura here also aligns with the fact that the speaker stops to think "hard" about everyone involved in this situation. This, it seems, is the speaker's only form of hesitation before finally pushing the deer into the river. The caesura therefore functions as a final illustration of the speaker's discomfort, appearing in the poem as one last form of hesitation before the speaker does what's necessary.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "narrow; to"
- **Line 6:** "heap, a," "doe, a"
- **Line 7:** "already, almost"
- **Line 8:** "off; she"
- **Line 10:** "warm; her"
- **Line 11:** "alive, still," ", never"
- **Line 17:** "all—my"

END-STOPPED LINE

Every line of the poem except for the first is arguably end-stopped. This makes the poem's pacing and flow feel terse and highly controlled. The speaker's tone becomes matter-of-fact as a result of this clipped, constrained style. Consider, for example, the fact that the speaker isolates each detail within its own line while describing the car idling in stanza 3:

> The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;

under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhuast turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

Each line in this stanza contains a full sentence, and each sentence contains its own observation about the car. This isolates each form of imagery, as the speaker comments on the image of the car's parking lights, then the sound of its engine, then the sight of its exhaust "turning red," and finally the profound silence of the surrounding wilderness. By end-stopping each line, the speaker gives the poem a methodical feeling, as if the speaker has committed this story of encountering the dead doe to memory and is now listing off the relevant details.

The end-stopped lines also add to the speaker's slow, contemplative tone. Instead of rushing from one line to the next, the speaker pauses at the end of each clause. This reflects the fact that the speaker is unsettled by the experience of finding the dead doe, but it also aligns with the speaker's pensive approach to the situation. In the same way that the speaker pauses to think about what to do before pushing the doe into the canyon, the poem itself comes to a brief pause at the end of each line. In other words, the end-stops encourage readers to approach the poem with the same kind of patience as the speaker applies to the decision about whether not to push the deer of the road.

Interestingly, the only definitively enjambed line is the first, when the speaker first mentions coming across the deer:

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.

The enjambment initially separates the deer from the fact that it's dead. For a brief moment, the reader doesn't know the truth; there's a sense of anticipation and potential as the speaker mentions coming across a deer, only for things to come crashing back down with the abrupt jump to "dead" in the following line.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-18

VOCABULARY

Canyon (Line 3) - A gorge or ravine that often has a river flowing through it.

Tail-Light (Line 5) - A red light on the back of a car.

Heap (Line 6) - A large, disorganized pile. In this context, the speaker uses "heap" to illustrate the large size of the deer's unmoving body.

Doe (Line 6) - A deer. A *female* deer.

Fawn (Line 10) - A baby deer.

Purred (Line 14) - The word "purr" can be used to describe the low and steady sound of a running engine. It also refers to the vibrating sound cats make when they're pleased.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The 18 lines of "Traveling through the Dark" are arranged into four quatrains (four-line stanzas) followed by a final couplet. The first four quatrains give the poem a feeling of consistency, as the speaker organizes each stanza in the same way. The fact that all the lines are roughly the same length and that every line apart from the first is end-stopped adds to this feeling of steadiness. All these factors contribute to the speaker's calm and levelheaded tone, which makes the poem sound contemplative and melancholy.

The poem's final stanza, however, breaks from the established form because it's a couplet instead of a quatrain. This makes the ending feel like it comes very abruptly. By cutting this stanza short, the speaker implies that it's not worth dwelling for too long on death. The speaker has finally decided to push the doe into the canyon once and for all, and the shorter stanza length reflects this newfound resolve to simply get the task over with.

METER

"Traveling through the Dark" is written in free verse and thus doesn't follow a set meter. This makes it feels relatively informal and conversational throughout.

Having said that, the poem *does* include several moments of iambic pentameter. This means that some of its lines contain five iambs, or metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). For example, take line 10:

her side | was warm; || her fawn | lay there | waiting,

This line is very close to iambic pentameter (though the final two feet are actually trochees; stressed-unstressed). This gives the moment a rhythmic bounce that makes the speaker's words sound especially melodic when talking about the discovery of the unborn fawn.

However, the majority of the poem's lines aren't written in any kind of meter. This inconsistency works alongside its more controlled elements—its steady quatrain stanzas and end-stopped lines—ensuring that the lines sound fresh and interesting throughout.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no set rhyme scheme in "Traveling through the Dark." This keeps the poem from sounding too cheerful or song-like, emphasizing the bleak nature of the speaker's story.

There are, however, several slant rhymes that appear throughout the poem. For example, a slant rhyme appears between the words "engine" and "listen" in lines 14 through 16:

> under the hood purred the steady **engine**
> I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
> around our group I could hear the wilderness **listen**.

The slant rhyme that occurs between "engine" and "listen" places subtle emphasis on these words, calling attention to the sound-related imagery of the engine's growling noise. Also note the internal rhyme that occurs between the word "hood" and "stood"—yet another rhyme that encourages readers to focus on the car.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Traveling through the Dark" remains unidentified throughout the poem. However, William Stafford has spoken in interviews about what inspired the poem, explaining that the events of the poem actually happened to him one night when he was driving along Wilson River Highway in Oregon.

It's reasonable to conclude, then, that William Stafford himself is the poem's speaker. This means that the speaker is a middle-aged man living in Oregon in the early 1960s. Having said that, none of these details are integral to the poem, which stands on its own without any background information about the speaker. This, in turn, keeps the poem's broad ideas about life, death, humanity, and nature feeling universal.

SETTING

The poem takes place at night on a road that the speaker describes as particularly "dark" and "narrow." Below this road there is a canyon, and in that canyon runs a river. Pushing the doe off the road therefore means sending it off a steep ledge.

Because William Stafford himself is most likely the speaker, it's reasonable to assume that the poem takes place in Oregon (where he lived), especially since there's a road in Oregon called Wilson River Highway. It's also likely that the poem is set at some point in the early 1960s, since that is when Stafford wrote it.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Stafford published "Traveling through the Dark" in a book of the same name in 1962. Stafford was in his mid-40s at the time and the book was his first well-known collection, going on to win the National Book Award in 1963. The poem was inspired by a real incident that happened to Stafford while driving along Oregon's Wilson River Highway at night.

Although the 1960s saw the rise of confessional and formally experimental poetry in the U.S., Stafford's work remained relatively straightforward and meditative throughout his career. As in "Traveling through the Dark," many of his poems use naturalistic imagery and feature a slow, contemplative tone. Unlike the charged and passionate lyricism of a poet like Sylvia Plath or the verbose style of a poet like Allen Ginsberg, Stafford used conversational language that felt self-contained and measured.

Because of his interest in nature and his unadorned style, Stafford is often considered alongside Robert Frost, whose poetry also uses plain language to calmly explore the mysteries and nuances of daily life. A poem like Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" makes an interesting companion for "Traveling through the Dark," since both poems make observations about the natural world that hint at broader ideas about life itself. Stafford was also influenced by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth, yet another writer whose work often revolved around nature.

In 1970, Stafford became the nation's Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (now known as the Poet Laureate). He was also the Poet Laureate of Oregon—where he lived—between 1975 and 1990. Although his name isn't quite as recognizable as some of his more famous contemporaries, Stafford is now regarded as one of the most influential poets of the 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of the counterculture movement, in which people began to question and criticize things long taken for granted in society. Part of this counter-cultural mindset included what's known as the "Back-to-the-Land" movement, a school of thought that encouraged people to renew their relationship to nature. The Back-to-the-Land movement was sharply critical of modern society's dependency on urban settings and technology, and those who subscribed to this outlook believed that people were too estranged from the wilderness.

This historical backdrop is relevant to "Traveling through the Dark" because the poem examines the ways in which human technology has had a harmful impact on the natural world. The speaker's observations about the car imply that this kind of

machinery has intruded upon nature in a deeply destructive way, especially since the doe on the road was presumably struck and killed by a previous car.

This is not to say that the point of Stafford's poem is to set forth counter-cultural or subversive ideas—after all, "Traveling through the Dark" certainly isn't a protest poem. Rather, the poem's implications about the relationship between human technology and the natural world simply aligns with the fact that many people in the 1960s began to think more critically about the impact of human civilization on the rest of the world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More About Stafford — To learn more about William Stafford, check out this brief overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-e-stafford)
- Wilson River Highway — To better imagine the setting of the poem, take a look at this Google Maps image of Wilson River Highway, where the poem takes place. (https://www.google.com/maps/@45.4683081,-123.7431586,3a,75y,254.89h,95.05t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sYhDjhCDj9MQt23lw9AbSdw!2e0!7i13312!8i6656)
- The Paris Review Interview — Read an interview with Stafford as part of the magazine's "The Art of Poetry" series in 1993. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1865/the-art-of-poetry-no-67-william-stafford)
- The Stafford Archives — You can explore the digital version of the William Stafford Archives, which are housed at the library of Lewis & Clark College. (http://www.williamstaffordarchives.org/)
- The Poem's Inspiration — Listen to William Stafford read and talk about the inspiration for "Traveling through the Dark." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FL7coLPdpns)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Traveling through the Dark.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 4 Nov 2020. Web. 30 Nov 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Traveling through the Dark.*" LitCharts LLC, November 4, 2020. Retrieved November 30, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-e-stafford/traveling-through-the-dark.