

# AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives  
A Wider View – *Seni Seneviratne*

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## A WIDER VIEW

Seni Seneviratne

### Brief Summary

*A Wider View* explores the speaker's connection to their great-great-grandfather, imagining his life as a factory worker in **industrial Leeds** in **1869**. Surrounded by smoke, disease and exhausting labour, the ancestor still searches for “**a wider view**” – moments of beauty, hope and escape beyond the harsh limits of **working-class** life. In the present day, the speaker walks through the same streets and feels time “**collapse**,” creating a powerful meeting between past and present.

The poem suggests that imagination and aspiration can help people endure suffering, and it highlights how identity and resilience are passed down through generations. It also subtly reflects on wider histories of inequality and labour, which can link to the **legacies** of **migration** and **colonialism** shaping British identities.

### Synopsis

- The poem opens with the speaker imagining their great-great-grandfather in **19th-century industrial Leeds**, working long hours in dusty, smoke-filled conditions.
- He searches for space above the factories to protect his dreams and his newborn, seeking something beyond the harsh environment. On his journey home, he takes a longer route to enjoy a wider view, noticing industrial landmarks and chimneys that **symbolise** both **confinement** and imagined beauty.
- The poem **shifts** to the present day, with the speaker walking the same streets and observing modern **remnants** of the past. A strong connection emerges across time, linking the speaker to their ancestor through shared places and memory.
- The poem concludes by reflecting on **continuity** between generations, highlighting how personal and family histories continue to shape identity over time.



### Context

#### Industrial Revolution and Working-Class Life

The poem is rooted in the **Industrial Revolution**, a period of rapid industrial growth in **19th-century** Britain's industrial growth transformed cities like Leeds into major manufacturing centres with mills and factories. Many workers faced long hours, **dangerous labour**, pollution, and serious diseases such as **cholera**. Seneviratne presents the speaker's great-great-grandfather as trapped in exhausting industrial life, yet still reaching for hope through his desire for “**a wider view**”, **symbolising** escape, ambition, and emotional survival.



## Leeds

Seneviratne uses real Leeds **landmarks** (such as Marshall's Temple Mill, Tower Works, and the Dark Arches) to root the poem in a specific place. This makes the poem feel like a journey through a city where the past still exists within the present, suggesting that history is “built into” the streets and architecture.



## Family Heritage and Identity

**Seni Seneviratne**, a British poet of **Sri Lankan heritage** born and raised in Leeds, frequently explores themes of identity, heritage, and belonging. In this poem, she bridges her own **contemporary** experience of the city with imagined moments from her ancestor's life almost 150 years earlier. This **multigenerational** perspective highlights how family history and personal identity interact with broader social and historical contexts. The poem also reflects a wider literary trend in contemporary British poetry that explores ancestry, migration, and **urban change**, showing how individuals carry the influence of earlier generations while negotiating their place in a transforming world.

## The title “A Wider View”

The title suggests a desire to look beyond immediate surroundings and limitations. For the great-great-grandfather, this means seeking relief from the physical confinement of industrial labour and the polluted city, both literally by taking a longer route home and imaginatively by lifting his gaze beyond factories and mills.

### A Wider View

“A wider view” reflects emotional and mental escape. Although the ancestor's life is shaped by exhausting work and poor conditions, the title implies that imagination, hope, and aspiration allow him to see beyond his circumstances and preserve a sense of dignity and purpose.

Could also refer to perspective across generations. By connecting the ancestor's experiences with the speaker's present-day walk through Leeds, the poem invites readers to take a wider view of time, heritage, and place, recognising how past lives continue to shape identity in the present.



## Perspective and Tone

The poem is written in the **first person**, allowing the speaker to move between imagined accounts of their great-great-grandfather's life and their own present-day experience. This personal perspective creates **intimacy**, positioning the speaker as both **observer** and **inheritor** of family history rather than a detached narrator.

The **tone** is reflective and quietly **reverent**, shaped by respect for the ancestor's **endurance** and longing for something beyond his harsh and **restrictive** immediate surroundings. In the final stanza, the **tone** becomes calm and **expansive**, as past and present momentarily align, suggesting continuity and the power of **perspective** to connect generations. By blending **historical imagination** with lived experience, the speaker reflects on place across generations.



## A Wider View

Alliteration creates a tight, repetitive sound, reflecting cramped working-class living conditions. Setting is restricted with a lack of privacy

Industrial imagery and sibilance create a bleak atmosphere, suggesting the environment is polluted and oppressive. Dreams are presented as something physical and buildable, implying ambition and resilience despite hardship.

Specific time and sensory detail ground the poem in real industrial hardship. Dust and long hours suggest exploitation and exhaustion, while the artificial factory light feels controlling.

**“wider view”** symbolises freedom, hope, and mental relief beyond class limits.

Industrial noise is overwhelming and oppressive, and the list of machinery creates a relentless atmosphere. The imagined bells contrast with machines, symbolising peace and humanity, showing imagination as resistance.

From the backyard of his back-to-back,  
my great-great-grandad searched for spaces  
in the smoke-filled sky to stack his dreams,  
high enough above the cholera to keep them  
and his newborn safe from harm.

In eighteen sixty-nine, eyes dry with dust  
from twelve hours combing flax beneath  
the conicals of light in Marshall's Temple Mill,  
he took the long way home because  
he craved the comfort of a wider view.

As he passed the panelled gates of Tower Works,  
the tall octagonal crown of Harding's chimney  
drew his sights beyond the limits of his working life  
drowned the din of engines, looms and shuttles  
with imagined peals of ringing bells.

**“searched”** suggests hope takes effort and determination in a world with few opportunities. **“spaces”** implies that gaps are rare, making freedom feel limited—people search for ‘breathing space’.

Disease and the vulnerable newborn highlight how industrial poverty threatens life, so dreaming becomes a form of protection and survival.

Date written in full slows the pace so the reader feels the weight of time.

“Temple” creates a contrast between the sacred connotations of worship and the harsh reality of factory labour, making the working conditions feel even more brutal and dehumanising.

Taking the long way suggests home and work both feel confining, so walking becomes his only escape. **“craved”** implies emotional hunger.

Gates suggests exclusion and inequality, while crown imagery makes industry seem powerful and dominant. His upward gaze shows aspiration and imagination pushing past the boundaries of his working life.



Personification makes the city seem alive with memory and pain.

Time “*collapsing*” suggests past and present folding together, and the river image implies generations flowing into one another. Being “*swept*” suggests the speaker is carried by history into connection.

The paradox suggests time moves constantly but their bond remains stable. Being “*anchored*” implies heritage gives identity, and shared gaze suggests connection through perspective rather than speech.

Today, my footsteps echo in the sodium gloom  
 of Neville Street’s Dark Arches and the red-brick vaults

begin to moan as time, collapsing in the River Aire,  
 sweeps me out to meet him on the Wharf.

We stand now, timeless in the flux of time, anchored

only by the axis of our gaze – a ventilation shaft

with gilded tiles, and Giotto’s geometric lines –

while the curve of past and future generations

arcs between us.

The present tense makes the past feel close, and echoing footsteps create a haunting sense of repetition. The cold artificial light and enclosed architecture suggest the city still carries the weight of industrial history.

Beauty in ordinary industrial detail suggests hope exists even within hardship. Art references elevate the scene, implying imagination gives meaning to place. The curve/arc imagery presents time as a bridge, ending on continuity and legacy.

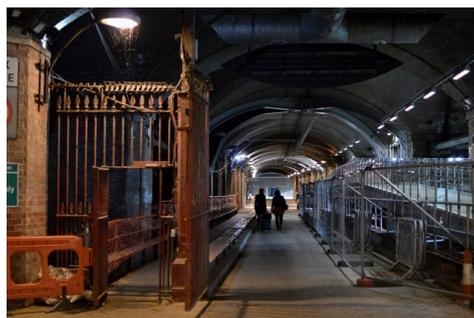
## Structure

### Free verse

- The poem is written in **free verse**, with no regular rhyme scheme or metre. This gives it a natural, **conversational flow**, as if the speaker is thinking aloud while reflecting on family history.
- The lack of a strict pattern also reflects how memory and ancestry are not neat or predictable, but unfolding and personal.

### Time shift

- The poem moves from the ancestor’s world (“*In eighteen sixty-nine*”) to the speaker’s present (“*Today*”).
- This **structural shift** creates a strong link between generations, suggesting the past is not distant but still present within the city. It also shows how the speaker’s **identity** is shaped by inherited history and experience.



### Journey structure (walking through time)

- Both the ancestor and the speaker move through Leeds on foot, so the poem follows a physical journey through the city. This makes the reader experience the setting step-by-step, almost like **retracing** history.
- Walking also **symbolises** a search for escape and perspective, linking to the ancestor who “**took the long way home**” to find “**a wider view**.”
- When the speaker repeats this movement in the present (“**my footsteps echo**”), it suggests the same streets hold memory, so the journey becomes a **bridge** between generations rather than just a route through a place.



### Enjambment

- Lines often run on (for example “**searched for spaces / in the smoke-filled sky**”), creating a steady, **continuous pace**. This mirrors walking and reinforces the sense of time flowing forward.
- It also suggests experiences and generations connect across lines, rather than being separated or contained.

### Quiet ending (continuity)

- The poem ends with a calm, reflective image (“**generations / arcs between us**”) rather than a dramatic conclusion. This creates a sense of **continuity** and connection, suggesting family history continues beyond the poem itself.
- The ending leaves the reader with a “**wider view**” of time, showing the speaker and ancestor linked through shared hope and perspective.

## Language, Imagery and Themes

### Industrial pollution

The poem presents the industrial city as damaging and suffocating through **bleak imagery**. The “**smoke-filled sky**” suggests pollution has invaded even natural space, creating a sense of oppression. The reference to “**cholera**” adds **historical realism** and highlights how **working-class** communities faced serious danger through poor living conditions, making survival feel uncertain. Noise pollution is also presented as overwhelming; the list “**engines, looms and shuttles**” creates a **relentless** and **mechanical rhythm**.

### Dreams

Hope is presented as **active** and deliberate rather than passive. The **metaphor** “**stack his dreams**” makes dreams seem physical and **constructed**, suggesting the ancestor is building a future against harsh conditions. The **verb** “**searched**” reinforces this effort, implying hope is **scarce**. Linking dreams to safety (“**safe from harm**”) suggests aspiration is a form of protection as well as ambition.



### Confinement vs freedom

The poem repeatedly suggests **restriction**, then contrasts it with the desire to escape. The “**back-to-back**” setting implies cramped housing and limited opportunity, while “**the long way home**” suggests even home offers little comfort. The phrase “**craved the comfort of a wider view**” turns freedom into something emotionally necessary, showing how imagination offers relief from **confinement**.



### Personification and the city as living memory

The city is presented as if it holds the past within it. The speaker’s “**footsteps echo**” creates a haunting atmosphere, suggesting history repeats itself. **Personification** in “**vaults / begin to moan**” makes the architecture seem alive with pain and memory, implying the suffering of past workers still lingers in the streets.

### Time imagery

Time is described in unstable, powerful ways, especially in “**time, collapsing in the River Aire**”, which suggests past and present folding together. The **paradox** “**timeless in the flux of time**” captures the poem’s message that life changes, but inherited connection remains. The final image of generations that “**arc between us**” turns time into something shaped and continuous, emphasising legacy and shared experience.



## Comparisons

### In a London Drawing Room – George Eliot

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both <i>A Wider View</i> and <i>In a London Drawing Room</i> present speakers who observe their urban environments closely, using <b>imagery</b> to show how cities shape human experience. In <i>A Wider View</i>, the <b>industrial atmosphere</b> is captured through “<b>smoke-filled sky</b>” and “<b>eyes dry with dust</b>”, while Eliot similarly presents London as oppressive through “<b>the sky is cloudy</b>” and “<b>a long line of wall</b>” that blocks variety and freedom.</li> <li>• Both poems suggest that city life can be physically and emotionally draining, especially for ordinary people. Seneviratne highlights brutal labour through “<b>twelve hours combing flax</b>”, and Eliot implies a lack of nourishment and joy through “<b>No figure lingering / Pauses to feed the hunger of the eye</b>”, suggesting the city starves people of beauty and imagination.</li> <li>• Both poets explore restriction and <b>claustrophobia</b> in urban spaces. Seneviratne shows <b>confinement</b> through the ancestor living “<b>back-to-back</b>” and needing to “<b>search</b>” for room to dream, while Eliot shows the city cutting off escape through “<b>houses opposite / Cutting the sky</b>”, making the environment feel closed and suffocating.</li> </ul>
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A Wider View</i> ultimately finds meaning and connection within the city, while <i>In a London Drawing Room</i> presents the city as lifeless and joyless. Seneviratne uses <b>personification</b> to bring the city to life when “<b>the red-brick vaults / begin to moan</b>”, suggesting the streets hold memory and voice, whereas Eliot insists London lacks warmth and vitality, describing “<b>the lowest rate of colour, warmth &amp; joy</b>”.</li> <li>• Seneviratne’s poem offers hope through imagination and perspective, as the ancestor “<b>craved the comfort of a wider view</b>” and replaces <b>industrial noise</b> with “<b>imagined peals of ringing bells</b>”. Eliot’s poem is more pessimistic, presenting a world that leaves people “<b>Without a break to hang a guess upon</b>”, implying the city destroys creativity.</li> <li>• <i>A Wider View</i> connects past and present, creating <b>generational continuity</b> through “<b>timeless in the flux of time</b>” and ending with “<b>generations / arcs between us</b>”, while <i>In a London Drawing Room</i> focuses on the present moment only, making its bleakness feel fixed and <b>unchanging</b> rather than part of a larger, connected history.</li> </ul>



## A Portable Paradise – Roger Robinson

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both poems show individuals trying to survive hostile or <b>pressurised environments</b> by creating a form of comfort that cannot easily be taken away. In <i>A Wider View</i>, the ancestor mentally escapes the industrial world through “<b>imagined peals of ringing bells</b>”, while in <i>A Portable Paradise</i> the speaker protects their <b>inner refuge</b> through “<b>That way they can’t steal it</b>”, suggesting comfort must be guarded.</li> <li>• Both poems connect personal strength to heritage and family influence. Seneviratne links the speaker to their “<b>great-great-grandad</b>” and ends with <b>continuity</b> in “<b>the curve of past and future generations</b>”, while Robinson roots his idea of paradise in <b>ancestry</b> through “<b>And if I speak of Paradise / then I’m speaking of my grandmother</b>”, showing inherited wisdom shaping survival.</li> <li>• Both poets present harsh realities that make escape necessary. Seneviratne describes <b>industrial hardship</b> through “<b>cholera</b>” and exhausting labour in “<b>twelve hours combing flax</b>”, while Robinson hints at threat and instability through the need to hide paradise “<b>on my person,</b>” suggesting danger and vulnerability.</li> </ul>
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A Wider View</i> finds comfort through place and perspective, as the ancestor “<b>craved the comfort of a wider view</b>” and the speaker’s walk allows them to meet the past. In contrast, <i>A Portable Paradise</i> finds comfort through <b>portability</b> and imagination, encouraging the speaker to build a paradise that can travel anywhere, shown through the practical instructions in “<b>get yourself to an empty room</b>”.</li> <li>• Seneviratne’s poem is rooted in public history and <b>working-class struggle</b>, using industrial <b>imagery</b> like “<b>din of engines, looms and shuttles</b>” to show <b>oppression</b>. Robinson’s poem is more focused on private coping strategies and emotional <b>self-preservation</b>, ending with a gentler sense of renewal in “<b>fresh hope / of morning</b>”.</li> <li>• <i>A Wider View</i> ends with connection and continuity, as the speaker and ancestor stand “<b>anchored / only by the axis of our gaze</b>”, while <i>A Portable Paradise</i> ends with advice and reassurance, suggesting paradise is something the reader can actively create and maintain rather than something discovered through history.</li> </ul>



## Like an Heiress – Grace Nichols

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both poems explore heritage as a form of <b>inheritance</b>, showing how the speaker's relationship with the world is shaped by what they receive from the past. In <i>A Wider View</i>, heritage is passed through generations, while <i>Like an Heiress</i> presents nature itself as inheritance, with the speaker claiming <b>"I am an heiress"</b>.</li> <li>• Both poems present speakers reflecting on their environment in a way that links personal identity to place. Seneviratne's speaker walks through Leeds and feels time collapse in <b>"time, collapsing in the River Aire"</b>, while Nichols' speaker is drawn to the sea's beauty through <b>"drawn to the light of her / eye-catching jewels"</b>, showing the environment shaping emotion and thought.</li> <li>• Both poems show that beauty can exist alongside damage. In <i>A Wider View</i>, harsh industry is contrasted with hope through <b>"imagined peals of ringing bells"</b>, while Nichols <b>contrasts</b> wonder with pollution through <b>"a wave of rubbish against the seawall"</b>, forcing the speaker to confront human impact.</li> </ul>
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A Wider View</i> is ultimately hopeful, suggesting imagination and heritage create continuity even in hardship, ending with <b>"generations / arcs between us"</b>. <i>Like an Heiress</i> is more urgent and critical, using the speaker's inheritance to emphasise responsibility and threat, ending with concern for <b>"the fate of our planet"</b>.</li> <li>• Seneviratne focuses on human endurance under <b>industrial oppression</b>, using images like <b>"smoke-filled sky"</b> and <b>"cholera"</b> to show survival and struggle, while Nichols focuses on <b>environmental damage</b> and human <b>carelessness</b>, emphasising modern waste through <b>"used car tyres, plastic bottles, styrofoam cups"</b>.</li> <li>• <i>A Wider View</i> presents the city as a place where history can connect people across time, with the speaker becoming <b>"timeless in the flux of time"</b>, whereas <i>Like an Heiress</i> presents nature as something <b>inherited</b> but <b>endangered</b>, turning the speaker's sense of ownership into responsibility and guilt rather than comfort.</li> </ul>

