

Texts for Class 1: Introspection, Exploration

John Keats: *Ode to Autumn* (1819)

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

William Butler Yeats: Sailing to Byzantium (1927)

I

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

William Butler Yeats: Under Ben Bulben (1938)¹

I

Swear by what the Sages spoke
Round the Mareotic Lake²
That the Witch of Atlas³ knew,
Spoke and set the cocks a-crow.

Swear by those horsemen, by those women,
Complexion and form prove superhuman,
That pale, long visaged company⁴
That airs an immortality
Completeness of their passions won;
Now they ride the wintry dawn
Where Ben Bulben⁵ sets the scene.

Here's the gist of what they mean.

II

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two eternities,
That of race and that of soul,
And ancient Ireland knew it all.
Whether man dies in his bed
Or the rifle knocks him dead,
A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst man has to fear.
Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
Sharp their spades, their muscle strong,
They but thrust their buried men
Back in the human mind again.⁶

¹ Footnotes adapted from <https://interestingliterature.com/2020/08/yeats-under-ben-bulben-summary-analysis/>
Passages marked in "quotations" are taken directly from that source,

² A lake south of Alexandria in Egypt, associated with early Christian monasticism.

³ Reference to a Witch of the Mareotic Lake in a poem by Shelley.

⁴ Reference to the *Sidhe* (pronounced "shee"), the fairies and gods associated with ancient Ireland. "Yeats concludes this first section by claiming that the rest of the poem constitutes the wisdom of these various ancients, Celtic and Egyptian, Christian and Pagan."

⁵ A flat-topped mountain near Sligo, chosen by Yeats as his final resting-place.

⁶ "This passage is essentially a summary of Yeats' views on the human soul. [...] Death is only a 'brief parting' from those we hold dear, and the grave-diggers are but returning people to the common mind of the human race."

III

You that Mitchel's prayer have heard ⁷
'Send war in our time, O Lord!'
Know that when all words are said
And a man is fighting mad,
Something drops from eyes long blind
He completes his partial mind, ⁸
For an instant stands at ease,
Laughs aloud, his heart at peace,
Even the wisest man grows tense
With some sort of violence
Before he can accomplish fate
Know his work or choose his mate.

IV

Poet and sculptor do the work
Nor let the modish painter shirk
What his great forefathers did,
Bring the soul of man to God,
Make him fill the cradles right. ⁹

Measurement began our might:
Forms a stark Egyptian thought,
Forms that gentler Phidias ¹⁰ wrought.

Michael Angelo left a proof
On the Sistine Chapel roof,
Where but half-awakened Adam
Can disturb globe-trotting Madam
Till her bowels are in heat,
Proof that there's a purpose set
Before the secret working mind:
Profane perfection of mankind. ¹¹

⁷ John Mitchel (1815-75) was an Irish nationalist who, in his *Jail Journal* of 1854 urged God, 'Send war in our time, O Lord!'

⁸ Yeats suggests that it is through violence that one comes to know oneself.

⁹ The 'modish painter' is the artist who follows only the trends of his own time; the true artist should "try for something timeless that transcends the artist's own time, and speaks to all generations."

¹⁰ Greek sculptor of the fifth century BCE.

¹¹ Yeats contrasts Michelangelo's ability to create a nude Adam that is also erotic to the prissier work of artists of the *Quattrocento* (the 15th century).

Quattrocento¹² put in paint,
On backgrounds for a God or Saint,
Gardens where a soul's at ease;
Where everything that meets the eye
Flowers and grass and cloudless sky
Resemble forms that are, or seem
When sleepers wake and yet still dream,
And when it's vanished still declare,
With only bed and bedstead there,
That Heavens had opened.

Gyres¹³ run on;
When that greater dream had gone
Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude
Prepared a rest for the people of God,
Palmer's phrase, but after that
Confusion fell upon our thought.

V

Irish poets learn your trade
Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.
Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries;
Cast your mind on other days
That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

¹² Italian art of the 14th century, Fra Angelico through Botticelli. The rest of the stanza describes a typical *quattrocento* painting.

¹³ Yeats believed that history runs in ever-repeating cycles.

VI

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid,
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago; a church stands near,
By the road an ancient Cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase,
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!