

The Irish Literary Renaissance

Selected Poetry

by William Butler Yeats

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML12-1190A



READING 2A Compare and contrast works of literature that express a universal theme.

3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods. **RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

DID YOU KNOW?

William Butler Yeats ...

- performed poorly in high school because he daydreamed.
- studied magic as a member of a secret society.
- turned down the honor of knighthood.

Meet the Author

William Butler Yeats 1865–1939

William Butler Yeats is considered one of the finest poets of the English language. Already an important poet in his twenties, he changed his style as he matured, becoming that rare poet whose last poems include some of his best work. According to critic M. L. Rosenthal, Yeats “grew at last into the boldest, most vigorous voice of this [20th] century.” In 1923, Yeats received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Early Influences Born in Dublin, Ireland, Yeats was the eldest of four children born to Susan Pollexfen and John Butler Yeats. Although Yeats’s family lived primarily in London and Dublin, they made frequent visits to Sligo, a rural area in western Ireland where his mother’s parents lived. There, as a boy, Yeats became fascinated with local stories about Irish heroes, heroines, and magical creatures. Years later, he would draw on these experiences of Sligo and its rich folklore in both his poetry and drama.

Ireland as Inspiration Following the publication of his first volume of poetry in 1889, Yeats met and fell in love with the actress Maud Gonne, a fiery Irish patriot. Although Gonne refused to

marry him, she inspired many of his finest lyrics and deepened his commitment to Irish nationalism. In 1899, Yeats, along with Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn, founded the Irish Literary Theatre (later the Abbey Theatre), which became the leading force in the Irish Literary Renaissance.

New Directions Throughout his life, Yeats had an intense interest in mysticism and the supernatural. This fascination grew stronger following his marriage in 1917 to Georgie Hyde-Lees, a spiritualist medium. In fact, Yeats created an entire system based on the metaphors and symbols revealed during his wife’s séances. Many of his best works were produced in the following decade—including “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Second Coming”—and reflect Yeats’s new set of beliefs.

In later years, Yeats’s poems often focused on themes of aging and mortality. In one of his last poems, he wrote lines that seemingly defied death and were to become his epitaph: “Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!” Yeats died in France in 1939; according to his wishes, his body was later reburied at Sligo.

Author Online



Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML12-1190B

LITERARY ANALYSIS: SYMBOL

A **symbol** is a person, place, object, or activity that represents something beyond itself. A flag, for example, often serves as a symbol of national heritage and patriotism. In literature, a symbol takes its meaning from its context. The symbols in Yeats's poetry often convey major ideas about life, death, and rebirth. One of his most important symbols involves Byzantium, an ancient Greek city. Yeats once commented, "Byzantium was the center of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for spiritual life by a journey to that city." Other symbols that figure prominently in Yeats's writing include water, gold, birds, and beasts. As you read the following poems, consider what these and other symbols might represent.

READING SKILL: CLARIFY MEANING IN POETRY

When reading complex poems, you may encounter some unfamiliar ideas and images. If a poem seems obscure, reading it several times may help clarify meaning. Use the following steps as strategies for reading Yeats's works:

- On your first reading, refer to the explanations in the notes and think about the poem's **subject**.
- The next time you read the poem, note any **images** that stand out in your mind.
- On subsequent readings, spend time analyzing any **lines** that you think are especially difficult.

As you read each poem, use a chart like the one shown to describe the general subject of the poem. Then write down images and lines that you want to focus on.

Title of Poem:	
Subject:	
Images That Stand Out:	Difficult Lines:



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Should we fear CHANGE?

You get up; you go to school; you come home; you do your homework; maybe you watch a little TV or surf the Internet. You may find such a familiar routine reassuring. Or perhaps you're just itching for something to happen that will shake everything up. In the three poems you are about to read, William Butler Yeats examines the thoughts and emotions stirred up by the prospect of change.

QUICKWRITE You've probably heard people say, "Change is good." Yet many people find change disorienting and frightening. Make a list of some changes in your life that you think may occur in the future. Choose one of the items on your list, and write a paragraph in which you examine your feelings regarding that change.



Sailing to Byzantium

William Butler Yeats

BACKGROUND William Butler Yeats developed his own set of beliefs to help him interpret the mysteries of life. According to his mystical faith, history occurs in 2,000-year cycles; as each era comes to an end, another era—its opposite—is ushered in by a momentous occurrence. Many of Yeats’s poems, including “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Second Coming,” reflect this understanding of history.

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,
5 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect. **A**

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
10 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;
15 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

4 salmon-falls: the rapids in rivers that salmon swim up to spawn.

A SYMBOL
Reread lines 1–6. What might “salmon-falls” and “mackerel-crowded seas” symbolize in the poem?

13 but: except for.

14 its: the soul’s.

16 Byzantium (bĭ-zăn’shē-əm): a city of southeastern Europe (now Istanbul, Turkey) that was a center of European civilization, especially art and religion, in the Middle Ages.



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,
20 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.

17 **sages**: wise people; saints.

18 **gold mosaic of a wall**: artwork in an ancient church.

19 **perne** (pûrn) **in a gyre** (jîr): whirl in a spiral. (Yeats, however, pronounced this word with a hard *g* [gîr].)

23 **it**: the speaker's heart.

24 **artifice**: skilled craftsmanship.

IV

25 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 enameling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
30 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

29 **Emperor**: the ninth-century Byzantine emperor Theophilus, said to have possessed a golden sculpture of a tree with mechanical singing birds on its branches.

Literary Analysis

1. **Make Inferences** Why does the speaker prefer the spiritual world of “unaging intellect” to the physical world of “fish, flesh, or fowl”?
2. **Clarify Ideas** Reread lines 20–24. To what “dying animal” is the speaker’s heart fastened?

The Second Coming

William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
5 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
10 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
15 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
20 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

1 gyre (jīr): spiral.

2 falcon: a hawklike bird of prey;
falconer: a person who uses trained falcons to hunt small game.

6 ceremony of innocence: the rituals (such as the rites of baptism and marriage) that give order to life.

10 Second Coming: Christ's return to earth, predicted in the New Testament to be an event preceded by a time of terror and chaos.

12 *Spiritus Mundi* (spīr'ī-tōōs mōōn'dē) *Latin:* Spirit of the World. Yeats used this term to refer to the collective unconscious, a supposed source of images and memories that all human beings share.

14 This image suggests the Great Sphinx in Egypt, built more than 40 centuries ago.

20 rocking cradle: a reference to the birth of Christ.

Literary Analysis

- 1. Examine Diction and Tone** Review Yeats's diction, or choice of words, in the poem. Based on phrases such as "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed," describe Yeats's tone, or attitude, toward the Second Coming.
- 2. Analyze Imagery** Describe the image that troubles the speaker. What details of the image are memorable?
- 3. Evaluate Ideas** Paraphrase lines 18–22. Why might Yeats have ended the poem with a question?

When You Are Old

William Butler Yeats

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep; **B**

5 How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
10 Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

B CLARIFY MEANING

What striking **image** is presented in lines 1–4? Explain what you learn about the poem's subject matter based on this image.



Hommage (1999), Rowan Gillespie. Bronze, 150 cm.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** To whom does the speaker of “When You Are Old” address the poem?
2. **Clarify** Reread lines 5–8. What might the phrase “pilgrim soul” mean?
3. **Paraphrase** Restate lines 9–12 in your own words. In what way has the speaker’s love changed?

Literary Analysis

4. **Clarify Meaning in Poetry** Review the charts you completed as you read. Choose an image or a line that you think is particularly striking or important to the meaning of each poem. Explain your choice.
5. **Analyze Symbols** Using a chart like the one shown, select three symbols from the poems and write an explanation of what each represents.

<i>Title of Poem</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Explanation</i>

6. **Draw Conclusions** “Sailing to Byzantium” is considered one of Yeats’s most accomplished poems. What message does he communicate about each of the following subjects? Support your ideas with details from the poem.
 - youth
 - immortality
 - old age
7. **Understand Historical Context** Yeats wrote “The Second Coming” in January 1919, not long after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the end of World War I in 1918. In what ways are these catastrophic events reflected in the poem? Cite details.
8. **Compare Poems** Compare and contrast the ways in which the speakers of the three poems view change. Do they share any attitudes or expectations? Support your response with specific references to the poems.

Literary Criticism

9. **Author’s Style** Yeats once wrote, “I tried to make the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech.” Keeping in mind the importance of both **word choice** and **rhythm**, select a poem and comment on how successful you think Yeats was in this endeavor.

Should we fear **CHANGE?**

The word *change* means “to make different.” What gives it negative or positive connotations? What situations make the idea of change seem either frightful or exciting?



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