Introduction

Forum Publications are delighted to present our new products for 2020. We are especially excited about our brand new poetry books, which have been completely re-designed.

Ordinarily, at this time of year we would be busy sending sample copies of these books to schools around the country. The recent school closures, however, have made this impossible. But we hope that this Sampler will give you, the teacher, a sense of our new products.

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Sample Pages >>>>
The Bight
(On my birthday)

At low tide like this how sheer the water is.
White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.
Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
the water in the bight doesn’t wet anything,
the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.
One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire
one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.
The little ochre dredge at work off the end of the dock
already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves.
The birds are outsize. Pelicans crash
into this peculiar gas unnecessarily hard,
it seems to me, like pickaxes,
rarely coming up with anything to show for it,
and going off with humorous elbowings.
Black-and-white man-of-war birds soar
on impalpable drafts
and open their tails like scissors on the curves
or tense them like wishbones, till they tremble.
The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in
with the obliging air of retrievers,
braising with jackstraw gaffs and hooks
and decorated with bobbles of sponges.
There is a fence of chicken wire along the dock
where, glinting like little plowshares,
the blue-gray shark tails are hung up to dry
for the Chinese-restaurant trade.
Some of the little white boats are still piled up
against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,
and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,
like torn-open, unanswered letters.
The bight is littered with old correspondences.
Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful.

Annotations
Bight: a large, curved and shallow bay
[1] sheer: having a thin or transparent texture
[2] marl: deposits of silt or clay
[3] pilings: wooden struts that support decks and piers
[7] Baudelaire: Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), a French poet who often used the sea as an image in his verse and who strongly emphasised the importance of sound in poetry
[8] marimba: a xylophone-like musical instrument
[9] ochre: yellowish red in colour
[9] dredge: a digger-like machine that removes deposits from the seabed
[10] claves: an irregular rhythmic pattern
[16] man-of-war birds: seabirds, similar to pelicans
[17] impalpable: unable to be felt by touch; difficult to understand
[20] frowsy: untidy or dishevelled
[20] sponge boats: boats that gather sponge from the seabed
[21] retrievers: a class of dog known for its obedience
[22] gaffs and hooks: barbed instruments used to gather sponge
[22] jackstraw: a table game that involves a messy, random arrangement of sticks
[25] plowshares: the cutting blades of a plough
[29] stove in: having a breach in the hull
1. **Get in Gear:** Watch Video 1 How would you describe Key West Harbour, which is shown in the video? What three adjectives would you use to describe it? Is it a place you would like to visit? Give a reason for your answer.

2. What word does the poet use to convey the appearance of the water in the bay? Why do you think she chose this particular word?

3. What can the poet see emerging up through the shallow water? What colour is this material? How does the poet convey the manner in which this substance reflects the sun?

4. How does the poet say the water in the bay is behaving? What does she finds odd about this?

5. To what does the poet compare the colour of the water? What colour is being described here?

6. The poet says that ‘One can smell [the water] turning to gas’. Do you think the poet can actually smell this happening, or is it just a trick of her mind? Give a reason for your answer.

7. Lines 9 to 10 describe the dredge that is ‘at work off the end of the peer’. How does the poet characterise the sound it makes? Does the poet find this sound pleasant or unpleasant? Give a reason for your answer.

8. How does the poet describe the manner in which the pelicans enter the water? To what does she compare their actions?

9. What two similes does the poet use to describe how the tails of the man-of-war birds operate in flight? Why are the ‘drafts’ of air upon which they fly ‘impalpable’?

10. The poet describes the sponge boats returning to the harbour. To what animal does she liken the boats to? What do you think it is about these boats that makes her think of this analogy?

11. What does the poet see protruding out of the sponge boats? To what does she compare these items?

12. What objects are ‘hung up to dry’ upon the ‘chicken wire along the dock’? How does the poet describe the appearance of these?

13. The poet describes some of the ‘little white boats’ on the shore. What condition are these boats in? How did they end up like this?

14. To what does the poet compare the damaged boats? Why do you think she makes this comparison?

15. Class Discussion: The poet says that the ‘bight is littered with old correspondences’. Consider the word ‘correspondence’. What different meanings can this word have? How do you think the poet intends the word to be understood here?

16. In the closing lines, the poet sums up the activity that takes place in the bight. What adjectives does she use? Why do you think she uses each of these? What do they suggest about her mood and outlook on this particular day?

**Theme Talk**

1. What does the poet’s descriptions of the sea and the birds suggest about her attitude to the natural world? Give reasons for your answer.

2. The poem was written on the poet’s birthday and the poet speaks of there being old ‘correspondences’ scattered around the bay. What does the poet’s description of the bight tell us about the poet and how she is feeling on this occasion? How might the bight be said to resemble her life?

**Language Lab**

1. Bishop often adopts a neutral or detached tone in her poetry so that emotion will not interfere with her efforts to capture things as accurately as possible. Discuss this statement with reference to ‘The Bight’ and two other poems on the course.

2. Bishop’s poems often feature moments of awareness, where the poet suddenly gains an insight or understanding after carefully studying a scene or a particular object. Does such a moment occur in this poem? Give a reason for your answer.
This poem was written in 1948. The poet was 37 at the time – in fact, the poem is set on her birthday – and she was living in Key West, a small U.S. island city that is part of the Florida Keys archipelago. A bend in the shoreline on the northwest side of the island creates the ‘bight’ that the poem describes, a wide bay and naturally protected harbour.

The Key West harbour was a busy fishing port when Bishop lived there. When the poem was written sponge harvesting was a major industry in Key West, and there would have been well over one hundred boats operating out of the bay.

The poet is standing on the bight’s dock or pier. She looks out at the water in the bay. It is low tide, so the water is not very deep. In fact, the water seems to be barely covering the seabed. The poet uses the word ‘sheer’ to describe the meagre presence of the water in the bay. The word ‘sheer’, which means transparently thin, is often used to describe fabric or clothing that is so fine that you can almost see through it. Here, it suggests that the water is barely concealing the seabed beneath. The still water, in the bright sunshine, has a light blue colour. The poet compares this colour to ‘the gas flame’ of a lantern or a stove ‘turned as low as possible’.

Aspects of the seabed are exposed, emerging up through the thin layer of water in the bay. The poet describes how ridges of ‘marl’ or silt ‘protrude’ above the water’s surface. They are like ‘ribs’ that poke through or are visible beneath the surface of the skin. These white mounds reflect the sun’s intense light, dazzling the speaker: ‘White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare’. The word ‘glare’ can also mean to stare in an angry or fierce way. It is as if the marl is staring right back at the poet, returning her gaze.

The water in the bight doesn’t seem to be behaving as water ought to behave: it ‘doesn’t wet anything’. The timber boats that float upon its surface are ‘dry’, as are the timber ‘pilings’, the long wooden poles driven into the seabed to support and secure the pier or dock. To the poet, the pale blue substance that coats the bay seems more like a strange form of gas (‘peculiar gas’) than a liquid. In fact, as she stands on the dock, she feels as if she ‘can smell it turning to gas’. There is a hint of danger here. The combination of gas, matches and dry timber means that the whole bay can be seen as ready or set to ignite.

The birds
The poet describes the pelicans and the man-of-war birds that are present in the bay. Both are very large seabirds, and the poet is struck by their great size, describing them as ‘outsized’ or enormous.
The poet observes the pelicans diving into the sea to catch fish. They ‘crash’ into the water in a manner that she considers ‘unnecessarily hard’. They behave like ‘pickaxes’ striking down on rock. Despite their intense efforts, they rarely emerge from the sea ‘with anything to show’. The poet describes how they fly away in an amusing manner, jostling and shoving each other: ‘going off with humorous elbowings’.

The man-of-war birds don’t dive, but stay aloft, soaring on drafts of air that are not visible or evident to the poet on the ground. The poet describes how, as they fly, they use their long forked tails to steer. When they wish to swerve, they ‘open their tails like scissors’. On other occasions, they ‘tense’ their tails, hardening them to create lift. When the tails are tensed in this manner they ‘tremble’ with the effort to hold hard against the drafts of air upon which they ride. Bishop likens the rigid tails to ‘wishbones’, the forked bone found between the neck and breast of a bird.

The boats

The poet observes the sponge boats returning to the harbour. She observes that these boats are continuously ‘coming in’. To her, they seem like ‘retrievers’, dogs that are trained to go and retrieve game for hunters. The boats seem to have the ‘obliging air’ of these animals, a sort of good-natured willingness or eagerness to help or please.

The boats are untidy and scruffy. The numerous poles and hooks that the fishermen use to gather the sponge are standing up and sticking out of the boats at different angles. They resemble the small rods of wood that are used in the game ‘jackstraw’, a game in which players try to remove one slim rod or ‘jackstraw’ at a time without disturbing the others.

The poles sticking up out of the boats also resemble the bristles, or spiky hairs, on an animal’s back, again calling to mind the image of dogs. The boats, the poet says, are ‘bristling with jackstraw gaffs and hooks’. Hanging off the top of the poles and hooks are some of the sponges that the fishermen have harvested. The sponge is hung up to dry in the sun as the boats return to the harbour and the poet observes how they resemble ‘bobbles’, small balls of material, usually made of wool, used for decorating clothes.

Sea sponges are aquatic animals that cling to hard surfaces on the sea floor. Natural sea sponges are harvested from the bottom of the ocean by fishing boats that specialise in sponge fishing. Sea sponges are harvested by divers using specially designed cutting hooks or knives. When the sponges have been cut, the divers gently squeeze the entrails out of the sponges and take them back to the boats. The sponges are then pounded to clean them and covered with wet canvas sacks on the deck of the ship, where the heat from the sun releases a gas that rots the sponges’ skins so that they can be more easily removed.

The poet observes the ‘fence of chicken wire’ – wire consisting of thin, flexible, steel wire with hexagonal gaps – that runs along the dock. The fence is used by the local fishermen to hang the severed tails of sharks up to dry. These shark tails will later be sold to Chinese restaurant owners and used to make soup. The poet describes the ‘blue-gray’ colour of the tails and the manner in which their smooth surfaces glister in the sun. To the poet, these tails resemble the sharp, smooth, metallic blades of a plough: ‘glinting like little ploughshares’.

At the end of the dock, a small yellow or reddish brown (‘ocher’) dredge is at work. A dredge is a machine, like a digger or excavator, used to remove material from a seabed or riverbed. The poet hears the constant clicking sound that the machine makes as it works. The rhythm of this clicking sound reminds her of the ‘off-beat’ rhythm of ‘marimba’ music. (The marimba is a percussion instrument consisting of a set of wooden bars that are struck with rubber mallets to produce musical tones.)

The storm

Key West is a place that experiences regular tropical storms. In fact, in the year that the poem was written, Key West experienced the most intense tropical cyclone that had been seen in the area in over a decade, the September 1948 Florida Hurricane. The poet observes that there are still a number of small boats ‘piled up/ against each other’ or lying on their sides ‘from the last bad storm’. Many of these boats have been badly damaged by the storm, their sides smashed or ‘stove’ in. Nobody has bothered to come and retrieve these boats, and the poet wonders if they will ever be ‘salvaged’. These small white boats remind the poet of letters that have been torn open, tossed to one side and left unanswered on someone’s desk.

The poet says that the bight is ‘littered with old correspondences’. This is a place that the poet has visited often and has come to identify with. There is something very familiar about it – it is a place that she can readily relate to. It is as if she has been interacting with the harbour, communicating with it, even, for such a period of time that a whole pile of ‘correspondence’ has gathered and accumulated. We can imagine that the poet has come here on different occasions and in different moods and found some solace or comfort in it all. Here is a place that seems to correspond with her own messy and disorganised life.

As the poet listens to the mechanical dredge going about its business at the end of the pier, she reflects upon the happenings in the bight. There is much activity ‘here’, but it is an ‘untidy’ activity, and there is little order to the place. The sponge boats are ‘frowsy’, which means scruffy and unkempt, shark tails are hanging on the wire fence and the boats damaged by the recent storm have been left where the storm tossed them. Yet everyone goes about their business, and ‘All the untidy activity continues’. There is something horrid and unpleasant about all of this. But there is something ‘cheerful’ about it all as well. As Bishop wrote to a friend shortly after: ‘I wrote [‘The Bight’] last year but I still think if I can just keep the last line in mind (‘all the untidy activity continues, awful but cheerful’), everything may still turn out all right’.
AN OBSERVER OF THE ORDINARY WORLD

This poem highlights Bishop's love and respect for the ordinary world. She exhibits a keen interest in this unattractive bay with all its everyday goings on. She observes all its aspects, from the birds swooping through the sky, to the marl that composes the seabed and the coastline, to the water itself, which resembles a thin, translucent fabric.

Bishop's poetry is also marked by its extraordinary attention to detail. Whenever she was fascinated by something, she would strive to describe it as accurately and clearly as possible.

- She notices, for instance, how the pelicans jostle each other in a manner that seems casual and lighthearted, as they emerge from the water.
- She notices the hooks, gaffs and other equipment stacked on the various spongeboats coming in and out of the harbour. She compares these to the jumble of sticks in the game of jackstraw.
- She notices the damaged 'white boats' that are piled up in one section of the harbour. These boats, she realises, are unlikely to ever be salvaged or restored. In a startling turn of phrase, she compares these to 'torn-open, unanswered letters'.
- She describes the shark tails, hung from a length of 'chicken wire along the dock'. The poet, a keen observer of life around the bight, is aware that these are intended for the Chinese restaurant trade.

A POET OF EMOTIONAL RESTRAINT

Bishop rarely expresses her emotions in a direct and unrestrained manner. Instead, her poems tend to look outwards, focusing on and describing the external world in careful and minute detail. Yet these descriptions can reveal a great deal about the poet and her inner state of mind.

The poem, we learn from the subtitle, was composed on the poet's birthday, an occasion when many people take stock of their lives. The bight, with all its messy activity, strikes the poet as a perfect metaphor for her own life at this moment in time.

The bight is depicted as a landscape of instability:

- The coastline is composed of 'marl', a loose, earthy deposit. These 'ribs of marl', we are told, are constantly 'crumbling', as they shift in shape and texture.
- This instability is also evident in the 'pilings', the struts that hold up the various piers and boathouses around the bay. The pilings, we are told, are 'dry as matches', suggesting they could go up in flames at any moment.
- The tools on the sponge boats are stacked in an unstable manner, like the little sticks in a game of jackstraw.
- The bight is a place of storms that have left a number of boats with hulls that have been broken or 'stove-in'.

All this instability, of course, reflects the lack of certainty and security the poet feels in her own life and in her own consciousness. The storms that have blown through the bight symbolise the emotional turmoil that has blown through the poet's own life.

The bight is also depicted as a landscape of labour and industry.

- The sponge boats are constantly returning to shore to deposit their catch.
- Pelicans are constantly diving into the water as they hunt for fish.
- Fishermen have hung shark tails to dry on a fence of chicken wire along the pier.

Bishop describes all this activity as 'untidy', suggesting that it is chaotic and disorganised. In this regard, it mirrors the poet's own life, which is filled with the 'untidy' activity of attempting to forge a living as a freelance poet and writer.

The dredge is a particularly apt metaphor. It probes the seabed, bringing up 'dripping jawful(s) of marl'. Perhaps this represents how the poet must delve into his or her own unconscious mind to uncover hidden thoughts, emotions and associations.

The broken boats, as we have seen, are compared to envelopes that once covered unanswered letters. We sense here the poet's guilt for failing to reply or respond to certain letters she has received. Or perhaps this comparison suggests an even deeper guilt, about friendships she has found herself neglecting.

This grim, industrial bay is an 'awful' place in many ways. But it is also a 'cheerful' one, full of industry and activity. The poet's life too is 'awful' in many ways, as she grapples with alcoholism, childhood traumas and other problems. But her life, like the bight, is also filled with cheerfulness, suggesting that on this particular birthday in Key West, she feels that she has a lot to be thankful for.
Ode on a Grecian Urn

I
Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

II
Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

III
Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
Tease It Out

1. What words or phrases in the first stanza tell us that the scenes depicted on the urn are set in the countryside?
2. Why do you think the poet is unsure whether the characters depicted on the urn are humans or gods?
3. The final three lines of the opening stanza describe a scene of revelry and celebration. How would you describe the atmosphere of this occasion?
4. The poet describes a form of chase in the closing lines of the first stanza. Who is being chased? Who is in pursuit? Would you describe this chase as fun and exciting or aggressive and threatening? Give a reason for your answer.
5. Why do you think Keats says that the illustrations on the urn can ‘express/ A flowery tale more sweetly than [a poet’s] rhyme’?
6. Keats describes the ‘melodies’ that the musicians depicted on the urn play as ‘unheard’ and refers to them as ‘ditties of no tone’. Why do you think he describes them in this manner?
7. What are the ‘Heard melodies’ that Keats mentions in line 11? How does Keats say we perceive or experience these ‘unheard’ melodies? Why do you think the poet believes that ‘those unheard/ are sweeter’?
8. Keats describes one of the musicians, a ‘Fair youth’, sat ‘beneath the trees’. Why does he say that the young man can never ‘leave’ his song?
9. In the last four lines of the second stanza the poet describes a ‘Bold Lover’ attempting to kiss a beautiful young woman. How do you picture this scene? How do you imagine each character is positioned? How are they behaving?
10. The poet returns to the trees and the musician that is sat beneath them. He considers both to be very ‘happy’. Why does Keats imagine the trees are so happy?
11. Why does he think the musician or ‘melodist’ is ‘happy’?
12. Keats describes the love that exists between the lovers depicted on the urn as ‘For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d’. In what way might love be considered ‘warm’? Why do you think the poet values the fact that it is ‘still to be enjoy’d’?
13. Lines 31 to 33: The poet describes another scene depicted on the urn, a procession of people on their way to some religious ceremony in which a cow will be sacrificed. Describe in your own words the scene that the poet presents us with.
14. Keats wonders what kind of town this procession of people has come from. What different types of town does the poet imagine has been left behind on this occasion?
15. The poet compares the illustrations on the urn to a ‘brede’ or braid. What is he suggesting about the style of the design?
16. Keats says that the urn has the power to ‘tease us out of thought’. What do you understand the poet to mean by this? Does Keats consider this to be a positive or negative thing? Give a reason for your answer.
17. The poet tells us that ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’. What do you think he means by ‘truth’? What kind of truth or knowledge do you think he has in mind? What does he mean by ‘beauty’? In what way might truth and beauty be linked or considered the same?
1. This poem is very much about art and artworks. Which artform does the poet consider to be the greatest or most profound? Poetry, music, or sculpture? Support your answer with reference to the text.

2. The poet is very much in awe in the urn as an artwork. Which of its features does he find most striking? Rank the following in the order you consider most appropriate:
   - Its shape
   - The images painted on its surface
   - The ‘slow time’ that went into its construction

3. ‘This poem describes how an artwork can capture a particular moment, freezing it in time so that it can be enjoyed by future generations’. Write a paragraph in response to this statement, using at least three quotations from the poem.

4. The poet experiences a moment of inner calm, of intense mindfulness as he contemplates the urn. Can you think a moment when you experienced such a moment of calm or clarity? Write a few sentences describing your experiences.

5. This poem contrasts a frozen, eternal world of art with the living, breathing world of human life. Which of these worlds does Keats prefer or valorise? Do you agree with his preference? In each case, give a reason for your answer.

1. **Class Discussion**: Over the years, many readers have found this poem's depiction of women to be problematic. Read again the lines describing the maids being pursued through the forest. Some readers view this scene as one of frolics and flirtation. Others view it as one of assault or sexual harassment. Debate this issue as a class and come to a consensus view.

2. Google the ‘ode’ form. Can you identify three features of the form present in the current poem?

3. Apostrophe occurs when a poet addresses an inanimate object. Can you identify three instances of apostrophe in this poem? In each instance, say what object is being addressed by the poet.

4. **Class Discussion**: Read the poem’s final lines once more. What role according to Keats should beauty play in our lives? Discuss the issue as a class and come to a consensus.
This poem is inspired by an urn manufactured over two thousand years ago in ancient Greece. Such vessels, known as ‘kraters’, were used for the distribution of wine at social gatherings. Their surfaces would typically be decorated with scenes from Greek life. They could be made from several different materials; some were metal, while others were ceramic. Keats, however, seems to have in mind one that was painstakingly carved out of marble.

Keats would have seen several such urns at the British Museum in London, to which he was a frequent visitor. He was also very taken by pictures he saw of the ‘Sosibios Vase’, an urn manufactured by the Greek sculptor of that name in the year 50 BCE.

The poem begins with a device known as ‘apostrophe’, which occurs when the poet addresses an inanimate object. Keats, in this instance, addresses the urn, calling it a story-teller or ‘historian’. We can follow the illustrations on its surface, as if they were a wordless comic-strip, tracing the events that they portray. These events, according to Keats, are ‘Sylvan’ in nature, meaning that they take place in a forest or woodland.

**The bacchanal**

One side of the urn depicts a party or festival known as a ‘bacchanal’. These events, which took place in woodland settings, were celebrations of wine, music and song. Such festivities were held in honour of Dionysus (known in Rome as Bacchus) a god who was associated with alcohol, freedom, madness and fertility. Participants frequently became extremely drunk and danced themselves into a frenzy. Sexual passions were freely indulged.
Let’s take a closer look at the bacchanal depicted in the urn’s illustrations:

This particular bacchanal has both male and female participants. The females are described as ‘maidens’, suggesting that they are young and attractive.

• The bacchanal takes place in a forest. The events depicted therefore are ‘leaf-fringed’; they are bordered or surrounded by leaves and foliage that the artist has painstakingly rendered on the urn’s marble surface.

• The male participants, it seems, are filled with sexual desire for these maidens. The maidens, however, are described as ‘loth’. They are unwilling to succumb to the males’ advances.

• The males, therefore, pursue the maidens through the woods. The maidens, meanwhile, ‘struggle to escape’ their pursuers’ attentions: ‘What struggle to escape?’

• Keats presents this pursuit through the forest as a type of harmless flirtation, as an ancient Greek version of ‘kiss chase’. The maidens, he suggests, freely participate, leading the men on a merry dance in a teasing prelude to lovemaking.

• While all this is going on, a number of musicians are playing pipes and tambourines (‘timbrels’).

Keats wittily refers to the image of the bacchanal as a ‘legend’. The term ‘legend’, of course, suggests how the artist drew on Greek mythology. But it can also mean an engraving or inscription, suggesting the powerful and emphatic nature of the artist’s brushwork.

Keats emphasises the frantic nature of proceedings. There is something ‘mad’ and ‘wild’, he suggests, about the male figures’ rampage through the forest, suggesting that they’re completely overcome by passion and lust. They experience an ‘ecstasy’, which suggests they’re in some kind of trance or frenzy brought on by wine, music and desire.

Keats, as he contemplates these illustrations, finds himself overcome with wonder and curiosity. He longs to know more about the musicians depicted playing beneath the trees. He longs to know more about these maidens and the men that are pursuing them.

Maybe these are ordinary human males. Or maybe the gods themselves have descended from their home on Mount Olympus in order to participate in the bacchanal: ‘What men or gods are these?’ Or maybe the artist intended to portray a group consisting of both ‘deities’ and mortal men: ‘Of deities or mortals, or of both’.

Keats also finds himself wondering where, precisely, these events are taking place. He imagines that the setting might be Tempe, a valley in northern Greece, or Arcady, which is located on the country’s southern peninsula. Both Tempe and Arcady were associated with Dionysos, in whose honour such bacchanals were held. Both were also famous for their natural beauty. Arcady, in particular, was considered to be a kind of earthly paradise.

The unchanging nature of the figures on the urn

Keats focuses on the unchanging nature of the figures on the urn. The trees depicted on its surface, being a mere combination of artist’s brushstrokes, will never change. Their ‘boughs’ or branches can never ‘shed’ the leaves that hang on them. They will never be ‘bare’ of foliage: ‘nor ever can those trees be bare’. The trees, Keats suggests, are ‘happy’ because they will never experience the ravages of autumn and of winter, existing instead in an eternal springtime: ‘nor ever bid the Spring adieu’.

Keats now focuses on one of the pipers whose playing at the bacchanal. This ‘Fair youth’, being a mere arrangement of ink and pigment, will also never change. He cannot ‘leave/ [his] song’. He cannot stop playing, or change position, or get up and walk away. As long as the urn remains intact, he will be there ‘beneath the trees’, playing his unheard music: ‘For ever piping songs’.

This ‘melodist’ or musician, according to Keats, is ‘happy’ because he can never become ‘wearied’. He will never grow physically fatigued. He will never be afflicted by boredom or mental exhaustion. The music that he plays will always seem ‘new’ to him; it will always strike him as fresh, energetic and exciting.

The poet then focuses on one of the male figures pursuing the maidens through the forest. The hope of this ‘Bold Lover’, of course, is that when he catches up to the maiden she will permit him to be physically intimate with her. The lover and the maiden run out-of-breath and ‘panting’ through the forest. The lover, it seems, is gaining on the maiden and is close to ‘winning’ or achieving his aim: ‘winning near the goal’.

But they are frozen at a moment of anticipation, the lover doomed to remain forever in pursuit. The lover will never achieve the ‘bliss’ of physical intimacy with the woman he chases, will never hold or kiss her: ‘never, never canst thou kiss’. Such intimacy will remain forever ‘still to be enjoy’d’ rather than actually enjoyed.

Keats insists, however, that the love experienced by the ‘Bold Lover’ is an extremely ‘happy’ one. ‘More happy love! more happy, happy love!’ The lover, he insists, should not ‘grieve’ the fact that that he will never actually touch the maiden or ever attain the ‘bliss’ of physical intimacy.

The lover and the maiden, being mere images, will never change. They will remain ‘for ever young’. She will always be ‘fair’ or beautiful, given that the ageing process will never fade or diminish her good looks: ‘She cannot fade’. The lover’s passion for her will never cool or lessen, instead remaining ‘For ever warm’. His desire,
Keats, in three lines, indulges in a great deal of personification, one of his favourite poetic devices (personification, we remember, occurs when an inanimate object is presented as if it is a living human being). In this instance, Keats personifies the paintings of the piper, the ‘Bold Lover’ and the fleeing maiden. He presents these figures composed of brushstrokes as if they were living, breathing human beings.

There is also a great deal of repetition. The unchanging nature of the figures on the urn, according to Keats, is something to be celebrated. This is emphasised by his repetition of the word ‘happy’ throughout Stanza 3.

The poet, as he contemplates this scene, is once again filled with curiosity. He longs to know more about the community depicted in the illustration: ‘Who are these coming to the sacrifice?’ He wonders about the ‘little town’ in which these people live, and which they have temporarily left behind in order to attend the sacrifice. Is their home located by a river, or by the ‘sea shore’? Or do they live in a settlement that’s been ‘mountain-built, that’s been constructed high in the Greek hills and that has a ‘citadel’ or fortress at its centre.

The sacrifice

Keats now focuses on the other side of the urn, which depicts a religious holiday. Such a ‘pious’ or holy morning is not for work or ordinary activities. Instead, people come together to honour and celebrate the gods.

- The urn’s illustrations depict an entire community that has set out from the town or village in which they live. They make their way in a procession through the countryside.
- They are walking together, the poet imagines, to some special location; perhaps a temple, or a sacred woodland clearing with a stone slab that serves as an altar.
- At the head of the procession is the community’s priest, who Keats describes as ‘mysterious’. Perhaps the priest is wearing some kind of mask or robe that gives him a haunting enigmatic appearance.
- The priest is leading a heifer on a leash. The heifer has been ‘drest’ or decorated with garlands of wild flowers that hang around its soft or ‘silken’ hide.
- Once the procession reaches its destination, the heifer will be placed on a ‘green altar’ and ritually killed. It will be a sacrifice intended to honour one of the gods that community worships.
Beauty
The poem concludes as it began, with Keats once again addressing the urn directly. He lavishes praise on this extraordinary object. He stresses that the urn's 'attitude' or shape is a 'fair' one, that it is pleasing to the eye.

Keats, in the poem's final stanza, emphasises the quality of the workmanship that has gone into the urn's illustrations. He reminds us of how its marble surface has been overlaid or 'overwrought' with a layer of brushstrokes. These marks are described as 'brede', which suggests that they've been skilfully interwoven or braided together. They combine to form the 'men and maidens' and the forest floor, with all its weeds and wildflowers on which the men and maidens tread: 'With forest branches and the trodden weed'.

Keats praises the expressive power of the urn's illustrations. The illustrations, he says, tell a 'flowery tale' – the word 'flowery' suggesting in this instance a tale of great vividness and detail. Keats concedes that the illustrations tell such a tale better than he could in his poetry: 'express/ A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme'. Keats, it seems, finds himself agreeing with the old proverb that a picture is worth a thousand words.

Keats imagines the music that is being played by the piper on the urn, experiencing these tunes or 'ditties' quite distinctly in his head.
- This imagined music is 'unheard'. It isn't experienced by the 'sensual ear', by the sense of hearing, with all its bodily apparatus.
- It consists of no 'tones', no audible sensations.
- It exists solely in the 'spirit' or imagination

Such 'unheard' melodies, Keats suggests, are preferable to real ones. They are 'sweeter', he says, as well as being 'more endear'd' or lovely. What does Keats mean by this? Perhaps he is referring to the inspirational qualities of the urn. The urn is so amazing that it has triggered extraordinary melodies inside the poet's head, melodies that are better than anything he has heard in the real world.

Keats might also be referring to the disappointment that comes with execution. Sometimes a composer will have an extraordinary idea for a tune, a snatch of melody running around his or her head. The composer will then write down the score, flesh out his ideas and then have it performed by actual musicians. All too often, however, the final product doesn't measure up to the initial inspiration. The heard melody performed on the violin or piano is less sweet than the unheard one that only existed in the composer's head.

Longevity
Keats also emphasises the urn's extraordinary longevity. He reminds us that this is an 'Attic shape', one that's a product of ancient Greek civilisation. The urn, then, has existed for at least two thousand years. And it will, Keats imagines, be around for hundreds or even thousands of years to come. Eventually, old age will 'waste' or destroy everyone who was alive in 1819 when Keats wrote the poem. New generations will be born and they will encounter 'other woes/ than ours'. They will face issues that Keats and his generation couldn't begin to imagine. But the urn will remain. It will still be there, in the 'midst' of these new generations with all their new-fangled problems and opportunities.

Mindfulness
Keats, as he contemplates the urn, finds himself entering a state of intense mindfulness. He finds himself 'teased' out of thought, removed from his normal habits of thinking. Looking at the urn switches off the non-stop narrative that fills each of our minds, with all its thoughts of past and future, with all its hopes, worries and distractions. For a moment, all such mental noise is quietened, allowing him to be fully present in the moment. The urn, in both its shape and its painted surface, exhibits a stark and simple beauty that makes it the perfect aid to meditation. This 'silent form', the poet suggests, is perfectly suited to 'teasing' us into mindfulness, to easing us into such a state of stillness and contemplation.

The Message
Keats emphasises how the urn will be a 'friend' to these future generations, just as it has been to all the generations of the past: 'Thou shalt remain…a friend to man'. The urn can be considered our friend for several reasons. It is, as we've seen, a beautiful object that provides us with an opportunity for mindfulness and meditation.

But the urn, Keats stresses, also has an important message for us. For when we contemplate its shape and surface we are reminded of some very important facts. The urn's message concludes the poem. It is presented to us in quotation marks, as if the urn were speaking to us directly.

Truth, in the sense of deep understanding, is utterly intertwined with beauty: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. Moments of deep understanding, when we truly come to terms with ourselves and the world, can only be gained by contemplating beautiful things. These could be art objects, like the urn itself, or beautiful pieces of music, or beautiful aspects of the natural world. Beauty, as such, is the only route to such deep understanding.

As we make our way through life, we acquire an enormous amount of data, learning facts, figures and practical skills.
But this, according to the urn, is mere information, rather than true knowledge. For the only true knowledge is the deep understanding that can be gained by contemplating beauty: ‘that is all/ Ye know on earth’.

The urn stresses that this deep understanding is ‘all [we] need to know. All other knowledge can be safely dispensed with. Of course, there is an element of deliberate exaggeration or hyperbole here. We still need to remember how to dress, tie our shoelaces and know when the Battle of Kinsale took place! But such knowledge is worthless compared to the deep understanding referred to above.

**CHANGE AND CHANGELESSNESS**

This is yet another poem where Keats focuses on the theme of change and changelessness.

• The piper on the urn, being a mere depiction, will never change. He will remain forever playing his music beneath the trees.

• The ‘Bold Lover’ and the maiden he pursues, also being mere depictions, will remain forever frozen in a moment of anticipation.

• The townsfolk, also being mere depictions, will remain forever walking in their religious procession.

Keats imagines the town that has been left behind by these worshippers as they make their way to the green altar. It will remain forever abandoned, and its streets will be ‘silent’ for ‘evermore’. It will be a ‘desolate’ place; one that is empty and devoid of life. Its inhabitants are forever frozen in their procession through the countryside and none of them will ever return to the town’s desolate streets.

Keats, as we have seen, envies the changeless nature of the figures on the urn, describing their frozen state as a ‘happy’ one. The ‘Bold Lover’ and the maiden, as we have seen, will always be young and passionate. The piper will never grow weary of his playing. The worshippers will be frozen forever in a moment of togetherness and celebration. This is why Keats refers to the urns images as ‘Cold Pastoral’. They are pastoral because they relate to the countryside. But they are ‘cold’ because nothing lives, breathes or changes; everything depicted is frozen in time forever.

The lot of flesh and blood human beings, Keats suggests, is far less happy, for we are subject to change and ageing, to sickness and eventually death. A similar desire for changelessness is evident in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and ‘Bright Star’. Many readers, however, question the understanding of happiness that Keats expresses in these lines. Who, after all, would want to spend thousands of years frozen in a single moment, even at a moment of great joy?

**LOVE**

Keats, in this poem, emphasises what we might describe as the negative aspects of love. When we fall in love, we experience ‘breathing human passion’. This, of course, can produce great happiness. But it can also produce great misery, especially if we fail to secure the object of our affections. Such unrequited love can leave one feeling utterly miserable. Your heart, Keats says, will be ‘high-sorrowful’ and will feel ‘cloy’d’ or heavy with frustrated desire.

Keats uses the metaphors of thirst and fever to capture the suffering love can bring. We find ourselves longing for the object of our affection just as a thirsty man might long for a drink of water. When we suffer from unrequited love, we resemble someone suffering from a fever. We are unable to focus or function properly. Our thinking is scattered and confused, like that of someone with a ‘burning forehead’ brought on by illness. Love, then, as Keats reminds us, is no easy business.

**ARTISTIC CREATIVITY**

Keats celebrates the extraordinary creativity of the sculptor who created the urn. He thinks of this unknown artist, who over two thousand years ago, took a solid block of marble and carved it into the shape that stands before Keats today, before painting the extraordinary images on its surface.

Keats describes this creative process.

• **Birth:** The urn was born at the moment the sculptor studied this block of marble and discerned the urn’s shape lurking within it.

• **Growth:** The urn developed over countless hours of painstaking labour. One of the urn’s parents, of course, was the sculptor, who carefully shaped the marble from which it is composed. Keats personifies the great patience and concentration that went into the urn’s construction, presenting these qualities as the urn’s foster parents: ‘Thou foster-child of silence and slow time’.

• **Marriage:** The urn’s marble surface was then decorated. This, according to Keats, was a sort of marriage, a coming together of marble and paint. The marble urn, according to Keats, became the ‘bride’ of the paint that covered its surface. Keats describes it as the ‘bride of quietness’. Paint, after all, is a silent medium, one that communicates visually rather than verbally.
Sailing to Byzantium

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.
1. Watch Video 26 about Byzantium. What do you imagine Yeats found so fascinating or appealing about this ancient civilisation?

2. The poet associates the summer with fertility and sexuality. What images does he use in the first stanza to convey this?

3. Why do you think the poet considers the young lovers and the ‘birds in the trees’ to be ‘dying generations’?

4. What natural cycle does the poet describe in line 5?

5. The young, the birds and the fish ‘commend all summer long’ the journey from conception to death that is part of all natural life. What does it mean to ‘commend’ something? Why do you think that the ‘fish, flesh, or fowl’ might ‘commend’ this process at this time of year?

6. What do you think the ‘sensual music’ represents? Who does the poet say is preoccupied by or ‘Caught’ in this ‘sensual music’?

7. The poet contrasts the ‘sensual music’ with ‘Monuments of unageing intellect’. What do you imagine these ‘Monuments’ are? What do you think the poet is describing when he refers to the ‘unageing intellect’ of these monuments?

8. Why is it that the young ‘neglect’ these monuments? Do you think the poet is being critical of young people for neglecting such ‘monuments’? Give a reason for your answer.

9. What do you understand the term ‘paltry’ to mean? In what ways might an elderly person feel ‘paltry’?

10. ‘A tattered coat upon a stick’. What image does this phrase call to mind? Why do you think the poet describes his body in this manner?

11. The poet introduces the idea of the ‘Soul’ in line 11. According to the poet, does the soul suffer the same fate as the body in old age? Give a reason for your answer.

12. Yeats imagines the ‘Soul’ clapping ‘its hands’ and singing ever louder for ‘every tatter in its mortal dress’. What sort of mood or emotion is the soul displaying? Why might the body’s demise inspire the soul to behave in this manner?

13. The poet describes a ‘singing school’ for the soul? What do you think he has in mind here? What do you think he means when he talks about the soul ‘singing’?

14. The only way that the soul can be enriched is by ‘studying/ Monuments of its own magnificence’. What do you imagine these ‘Monuments’ are? Do you think that these are the same ‘Monuments’ that the poet described in the final line of the first stanza? Give a reason for your answer.

15. Yeats says that he has ‘sailed the seas’ and arrived at Byzantium. Do you think the poet has actually undertaken this journey or is this just a journey of the imagination? Give a reason for your answer.

16. The poet describes a ‘gold mosaic of a wall’. What does this mosaic depict?

17. The poet calls on the ‘sages’ to come to him: ‘Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre’. What do you think this journey entails? Consider the following:
   • A journey from lifelessness back into life
   • A journey from the eternal into the temporal
   • A journey from Byzantium to Ireland
   • A journey from antiquity to the present

18. What three things does the poet hope the sages will do for him?

19. The poet says that his ‘heart’ is ‘sick with desire’ and no longer knows ‘what it is’. What aspect of himself is the poet describing here? For what, do you imagine, is the poet’s heart ‘sick with desire’?

20. What do you understand the word ‘artifice’ to mean? Why do you think that Yeats associates ‘eternity’ with ‘artifice’? What sort of eternal existence does the poet have in mind here?

21. Explain in your own words what the poet hopes the sages will help him accomplish.

22. Why do you think Yeats never again wishes to take his ‘bodily form from any natural thing’?

23. **Class Discussion:** What sort of afterlife does the poet reject? What sort of an afterlife does he desire?

24. Yeats describes the workings of Grecian goldsmiths. What is it about their work, do you think, that the poet most admires?

25. The poet imagines being shaped into a form that will ‘keep a drowsy Emperor awake’. Where do you think the poet imagines himself being and what form do you imagine him taking?

26. The poet says that he will sing about ‘what is past, or passing, or to come’. Explain in your own words what you understand him to mean by this? What do you think the mechanical bird and its song represent for the poet?
The Second Coming

The Second Coming is Yeats’ appalled and powerful reaction to a time of violence and chaos. To him it seems that the entire world is filled with confusion and disorder. It seems that everywhere the voices of reason and moderation are silenced, while those of intolerance and extremism shout ever louder. Evil men pursue their goals relentlessly, while the good stand idly by. Civilisation itself seems on the verge of being swept away by a tide of bloodshed. Furthermore, the poem predicts that even greater destruction is on its way, represented by the pitiless beast that ‘Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born’.

The Second Coming, though written in 1919, is a poem for our times. For in our age, too, it seems that ‘things fall apart’, that chaos and anarchy are everywhere. Each day the newspapers are so full of reports from ‘small wars’ around the world that it’s easy to think we’re drowning in a ‘blood-dimmed tide’. Watch Sky News for even an hour and it’s quite clear that evil is triumphing while good men do nothing. The worst are

Sailing to Byzantium

The cycle of birth and death

This poem’s opening stanza is all about the cycle of birth and death. This cycle applies to everything in nature. It encompasses mammals, or creatures of the ‘flesh’. It encompasses birds, or ‘fowl’. It encompasses the ‘fish’ that fill the seas. Every one of these creatures is ‘begotten’ or conceived through sexual activity. Then it is ‘born’. Then, eventually, it ‘dies’.

It is summer, a time when the ‘begetter’ phase of this cycle seems especially prominent. Every where the poet looks, he sees creatures of various types engaging in sexual activity:

• The ‘birds in the trees’ sing out their mating calls, their sweet tunes of flirtation and seduction.
• The seas are ‘crowded’ with throngs of mackerel that have gathered in their mating grounds at various points off the Irish coast.
• Salmon, too, are engaged in their mating season. They will then swim up river, leaping over falls and currents along the way, before spawning the next generation of their species.
• Summer, the poet suggests, is also the mating season for human beings. Everywhere he looks he sees young people in ‘one another’s arms’, as they kiss, flirt or simply hold hands. Here the poet refers to the ancient (though perhaps unscientific) idea that human beings are more sexually active in the summer time.

All of nature, it seems to the poet, has been sexually active ‘all summer long’. He has witnessed a festival of begetting, in which entire new generations of ‘fish, flesh [and] fowl’ have been conceived. Every creature, it seems to the poet, engages joyfully and willingly in sexual activity. And by doing so, they ‘commend’ or celebrate the cycle of birth and death, of which sexual activity is a crucial part.

The poet’s attitude to this cycle

The poet himself, however, cannot ‘commend’ or celebrate this cycle of birth and death. There are several reasons for this.

• The poet is keenly aware that the cycle ends in the extinction of every creature. Each new generation is a ‘dying generation’. No sooner is each creature conceived than the countdown to its death begins.
• Because the poet is an elderly man, moving gradually towards the end of his own life, this awareness of death is amplified.
• Because the poet is an elderly man, he is no longer sexually desirable. He could not, even if he wanted to, participate in the summer-long festival of begetting. The business of sexual reproduction, he suggests, must be left to the young: ‘That is no country for old men’.

The poet, at this stage of his life, wants to focus on art rather than on sexuality. He especially wants to focus on the great artworks of the past, which he refers to as ‘Monuments of unageing intellect’. This phrase suggests that great artworks, like monuments, are publicly available. Many artworks, after all, can be viewed by anyone who cares to do so. It suggests that great artworks, like monuments, are commemorative because when we engage with a great artwork, we remember its creator.

The frenzy of procreation described in the opening stanza is compared to a symphony or chorus. Each procreating creature is like one of the performers in this symphony. These creatures, Yeats suggests, are ‘caught’ or lost in the music they create; they are so absorbed in the pleasure and pursuit of sexuality that they forget about everything else.

It also suggests that great artworks, like monuments, are large and noticeable. Many great artworks exhibit a psychological vastness rather than a physical vastness. We might think of a play by Shakespeare or a miniature painting by Rembrandt, which doesn’t take up much physical space, but reveals entire psychological worlds.

These artworks – whether they are films or poems, statues or songs – are described as ‘unageing’ because their ability to inspire us never grows old. Each individual artwork, Yeats suggests, possesses an ‘intellect’ of its own, a unique personality or intelligence. When we study a particular artwork then we engage with its ‘intellect’. We develop our own conversation or relationship with the artwork in question. We need only think here of the intense bonds that people tend to form with their favourite songs, books or movies.

The poet’s tattered body
Each human being, the poet believes, is composed of two distinct parts: a physical body and a non-physical soul. The body is doomed to waste away and die. The soul, on the other hand, is immortal. Our souls, according to tradition, are housed within our bodies. Each soul, Yeats suggests, wears its body like a ‘mortal dress’, a temporary garment it will cast off at the moment of death.

The poet laments how the ageing process has affected his own body, his own ‘mortal dress’. Old age, he declares, has robbed his body of both its physical vigour and its good looks. The poet, in a striking turn of phrase, compares himself to a scarecrow: ‘a tattered coat upon a stick’. This is a most revealing comparison:

• His body is ‘tattered’, its flesh, bones and sinews damaged by the ageing process.
• His body is withered to the point where it is stick-thin.
• His body, he feels, has come to resemble a scarecrow; it is both grotesque and ridiculous-looking.

The poet, therefore, is faced with the ‘paltriness’ of old age. He is faced with being physically ‘paltry’, with being pitiful or pathetic. He is faced with being socially ‘paltry’, with being negligible and insignificant. He is faced with being a ‘thing’, rather than a proper human being. For who, in a world dominated by youth and beauty, really cares about or even notices the old?

Focusing on the soul
Old age, then, is only bearable if we focus on the soul rather than the body.

• The soul, Yeats declares, must ‘clap its hands and sing’. For Yeats, no doubt, this singing of the soul involves artistic expression: the creation of poems, plays and other texts.
• Our souls, Yeats says, must sing louder as we approach death. This reflects Yeats’ determination to keep improving his artistic practice. He wants to become better and better at writing as death approaches. He wants to create texts that explore the human condition with ever greater clarity and profundity, texts that will truly stand the test of time.
• The soul, Yeats insists, must attend ‘singing school’; it must study and practice so it can sing with greater clarity and volume. This reflects Yeats’ belief that artistic improvement can only be achieved by studying great artworks of the past. The word ‘but’, as used in line 7, means ‘apart from’, leading us to read the lines as follows: ‘there is no singing school [apart from] studying [the great artworks of the past]’.

They poet, therefore, decides to make the long sea voyage to the ancient city of Byzantium. Given its imperial past, Byzantium is absolutely filled with extraordinary artworks, each one a monument to the ‘magnificence’ of the human soul that created it.

Byzantium is an old name for Istanbul, the capital of Turkey. In medieval times, Byzantium was a great military power and the centre of a Christian empire that lasted for nearly a thousand years. It was also an extraordinary centre of learning, one that inherited the wisdom of both Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. It was especially famed for the skill of its artists and craftsmen, who created everything from enormous cathedrals to tiny but ingeniously crafted ornaments.

The mosaic
The poet has finally reached Byzantium and stands before one of the city’s many extraordinary mosaics (a ‘mosaic’ is an image made from assembling small pieces of coloured glass and stone). This particular mosaic decorates a ‘wall’ somewhere in the city, perhaps in one of Byzantium’s many palaces and cathedrals. It is hundreds of years old. Yeats describes how it shimmers with a ‘gold’ effect, suggesting the brightly coloured materials that were used in its construction.
The mosaic depicts ‘sages’ or men of great wisdom. God’s presence surrounds the sages, taking the form of golden flames: they are ‘standing in God’s holy fire’. This miraculous blaze, however, doesn’t harm the sages in any way. Instead, it fills them with vigour and intensity as if they were somehow sharing in the energy of God himself (it’s been suggested that Yeats was inspired by a Byzantine mosaic depicting Moses and Elijah, two great sages or prophets from the Bible).

Yeats, as we noted above, believed that every great artwork had its own ‘intellect’ or personality. And the poet, it seems, is captivated by the intellect of this particular mosaic. He develops an extraordinary connection with this golden image. We can imagine him spending hours before the mosaic, returning to visit it again and again during his visit to Byzantium.

Yeats’ connection with the mosaic is so powerful that the sages seem almost alive to him. He imagines that the sages could come to life and step out of the mosaic: ‘Come from the holy fire’. He imagines that the sages could act as his mentors or instructors: ‘be the singing-masters of my soul’. Under their guidance, Yeats’ soul will learn to ‘sing’ better than it ever has done before. They would help him to create extraordinary texts that capture profound truths about time, reality and human existence.

Yeats had a number of occult beliefs, which he detailed in his prose book *A Vision*. He believed that time is a stream that spirals in a ‘gyre’ or clockwise direction. He imagines the sages ‘perning’ or moving in a counter-clockwise direction, as if they were swimming against time’s current. Eventually, the sages will make it all the way to the twentieth century and stand before the poet as alive as they ever were.

Yeats, of course, doesn’t believe that such time travel is possible, nor does he expect the sages will literally step from the mosaic. But this metaphor powerfully captures the intensity of the poet’s relationship with the mosaic. It highlights how real the sages seem to him as he spends hours contemplating their golden forms.

Body and soul

Yeats calls on the sages to burn away his body using their ‘holy fire’.

• He memorably refers to his body as a ‘dying animal’, suggesting that it is subhuman, disgusting and beneath contempt. He longs for this wretched, scarecrow-like body to be utterly burned up, utterly consumed away by the sages’ miraculous flames.

• In particular, he wants the sages to eliminate his ‘heart’. This refers not only to the organ itself, but to all bodily systems associated with love and sexuality. Yeats’ heart is filled with sexual longing. But these are desires that he as an old man can’t satisfy or act on. This preponderance of unsatisfied desire has left the heart ‘sick’ or dysfunctional. Yeats is, therefore, happy for it, along with the rest of his body, to be consumed away.

• Yeats’ soul, then, would be liberated from the failing body in which it is currently confined.

• Yeats calls on the sages to ‘gather’ or carry his newly liberated soul and transport it into the ‘artifice of eternity’. Let’s take a moment to unpack this phrase. The word ‘artifice’ refers to expert workmanship. It also refers to something that has been cunningly or skilfully designed. Yeats, then, has in mind here great artworks like the *Mona Lisa* and Michelangelo’s *David*, which exhibit such extraordinary workmanship and design. These works are eternal in that they speak to people century after century.

The poet, then, longs for his soul to be gathered into one of these eternal artworks. It would reside forever within in some exquisite and unageing piece of craftsmanship.

The bird

The poet would like his soul to inhabit one such object in particular, a mechanical bird he has seen during his visit to Byzantium.

• The bird is hundreds of years old and was constructed during the heyday of the Byzantine Empire.

• The bird is made of gold that has been ‘hammered’ into shape by the gifted goldsmiths that constructed it. The goldsmiths are described as ‘Grecian’ because Byzantium was a Greek-speaking civilisation.

• The bird has been further decorated with gold varnish or ‘enamelling’.

• The bird’s body contains a carefully concealed set of pipes. Whenever the breeze passed through these pipes, it produced a sound like that of birdsong.

Yeats clearly takes great delight in this ingeniously constructed object that was created so long ago. He imagines a courtier placing it on an artificial golden branch, an extraordinary ornament that must have brought great joy and wonder to the ‘lords and ladies’ of the Byzantine court.

Or perhaps the bird was a gift for the emperor himself. Yeats imagines this precious object taking a place of honour beside the emperor’s throne. It would serve as an amusement and a distraction from the cares of state. Its mechanical singing would serve to rouse the emperor if he started to doze off on a hot Byzantine afternoon.
The poem views the natural world as a kind of system that passes through phases of birth, death and renewal. Every living thing, be it fish, flesh or fowl, is part of this system. Every living thing is ‘begotten’ or conceived, born, reproduces and eventually dies. The bustling sexual activity of summer conducted by birds, fish and youthful human beings seems to ‘commend’ or celebrate this cycle. The poet has come to view this process of birth and death in a very negative way, for his own personal cycle is nearing its end.

The poet draws a sharp contrast between art and nature. Birds, animals and human beings are subject to the cycles of nature described above. They are temporary; they change and they die. Great works of art on the other hand are subject to no such cycle. These ‘unageing’ objects never change or decline. These great songs, paintings, poems and films – collectively referred to as the ‘artifice of eternity’ – last forever, speaking to generation after generation.

NATURE

This is another poem in which Yeats presents art as a continuous practice, a craft or trade that must be perfected throughout the artist’s life. Despite his old age, the poet is determined to keep growing as an artist. If anything, the nearness of death makes him all the more eager to reach his full artistic potential. The poem stresses that such improvement can be made only by studying the great artists of the past. Yeats, then, despite being an accomplished, Nobel prize-winning poet, recognises that he must still attend ‘singing-school’ in order that his soul can express itself with ever-greater clarity and purpose.

‘Sailing to Byzantium’ is also Yeats’ most profound statement on the idea of attaining immortality through art. The poet, then, considers two different concepts of immortality. One is a form of reincarnation such as that envisaged by Buddhism and other Eastern religions. The soul would leave behind the body and the earthly plane of existence. It would be temporarily ‘out of nature’. It would then rejoin the natural world, housing itself within some new person, bird or animal.

YOUTH AND AGE

Yeats, however, rejects this form of immortality. The poet will not be re-born as any ‘natural thing’. He is determined that his soul, ‘once out of nature’, will never rejoin the natural world. He will never again be subject to the cycles of birth and death that govern the natural world. His soul will never again be attached to such a ‘dying animal’.

The poem stresses that such improvement can be made only by studying the great artists of the past. Yeats, then, despite being an accomplished, Nobel prize-winning poet, recognises that he must still attend ‘singing-school’ in order that his soul can express itself with ever-greater clarity and purpose.

The poet instead is focused on the type of artistic immortality enjoyed by Michelangelo and Shakespeare. He uses an extraordinary set of metaphors to describe the process by which such immortality might be attained.

• The artist of today can only achieve greatness by studying the masterpieces of the past. This is represented by the sages stepping out of the mosaic to act as Yeats’ mentors or ‘singing-masters’.
• The artist must focus on the soul rather than the body. This is represented by the sages consuming the poet’s body with their holy flame.
• The distractions of sex and sexuality in particular must be overcome. This is represented by the sages consuming away the poet’s heart.
• The poet will live on through the poems, plays and texts he has created over the course of his life. This is represented by the poet’s soul inhabiting the magnificent golden bird created by the Grecian goldsmiths all those centuries ago.

The poet would have little interest, we sense, in prolonging the life of his body through some revolutionary scientific method. Nor does he show any interest in the type of immortality associated with the Christian concept of heaven. Furthermore, as we’ve seen, he is not taken with reincarnation. Instead, he goes all-in on achieving the ‘artifice of eternity’. And maybe he has succeeded. After all, we are still reading his works today.
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She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
— Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

Annotations
[1] untrodden: remote; not previously or often travelled through
Tease It Out

1. Where in England is the river Dove located?
2. Consider the phrase ‘springs of dove’. Do you imagine the springs are likely to be located in a remote or a populous location? Give a reason for your answer.
3. Consider the phrase ‘untrodden ways’. Which of the following meanings, in your opinion, makes most sense:
   • Ways or paths that are seldom trodden by anyone outside the local community
   • Ways that are seldom trodden by anyone at all
   • Ways that are never trodden at all and have become overgrown, because the local community has disappeared
4. Why is the violet ‘half-hidden’?
5. What makes the ‘star’ mentioned in line 7 so special?
6. What do these comparisons suggest about Lucy’s appearance and personality? Would you agree that they are effective?
7. According to line 10, what has happened to Lucy?
8. The poet declares that only a ‘few’ people realised that Lucy ‘ceased to be’. What was the reason for this?

Theme Talk

1. What kind of relationship do you think the poet had with Lucy? Were they lovers, friends or casual acquaintances? Give a reason for your answer.
2. What do we learn about Lucy’s existence from the poem? Write a paragraph describing your impression of her life.
3. ‘Oh! The difference to me’. Do you think Lucy’s death has really made a big difference to the poet’s life? Is this last line an effective conclusion to the poem, or did the poet need to expand on his feelings for this lost young woman?
4. According to the poet, there were only a few people to ‘love’ Lucy. Which of the following options, in your opinion, comes closest to his meaning? Write two or three sentences justifying your choice:
   a) Lucy inhabited a very small community, but everyone there loved her.
   b) Lucy inhabited a reasonably sized community, but very few people there loved or even liked her.
5. According to the poet, none of these people were capable of praising Lucy. Why do you think this was? Would you agree that the poet is using the term ‘praise’ in a specific sense in these lines?
‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways’ comes from a set of five poems known as the ‘Lucy’ sequence, which were published in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth’s famous poetry collection. The poems concern Lucy, a young woman with whom the speaker is very much in love.

Lucy, we’re told, lived near the river Dove. There are at least four rivers by this name in England, several of which were well known to Wordsworth. It’s often assumed, however, that the poet is referring to the river in the Lake District from which his beloved home, Dove Cottage, derived its name. (Wordsworth lived in Dove Cottage from 1798 to 1803, during which time he wrote some of his greatest poems).

These poems have long left Wordsworth’s readers with a sense of mystery. Can the speaker of the poems be identified with Wordsworth himself? Is Lucy based on a real person that Wordsworth met and fell in love with? Or is she a fictional creation? Despite several requests, Wordsworth refused to comment on this.

This poem, the third in the sequence, describes Lucy’s life and death. Lucy lived in a most isolated corner of rural England, beside the source of the river Dove. We imagine her living on some remote, forested hillside, near ‘springs’ where the freshest mountain water comes pulsing from the ground. These streams would flow downhill, eventually combining to form the river proper.

Lucy, we sense, lived in a settlement that was a mere string of isolated homesteads and was too small to even be called a village. This isolated community has no real roads, only ‘ways’, which we imagine as tracks or forest trails.

The poet describes these paths as ‘untrodden’. Due to the area’s tiny population, they experienced little footfall. We can imagine that they are constantly on the verge of being overgrown by wildflowers, weeds and other vegetation.

Because Lucy lived her life in such an isolated, sparsely populated community, she got to know very ‘few’ people. The poet suggests, however, that the few people who knew her came to love her very much.

The poet declares that there was no one to ‘praise’ Lucy in this remote settlement. He seems to be suggesting that the ‘few’ who knew and loved Lucy were simple country folk. They lacked the education and poetic training to capture her specialness in words, to adequately pay tribute to her inner and outer beauty.

The speaker compares Lucy to a violet that grows beside a ‘mossy stone’. The stone obscures the flower, ensuring that it is ‘half-hidden from the eye’. Only an especially observant passer-by would notice it. Lucy resembles such a half-hidden violet not only because she is beautiful, but also because she is hidden away from the wider world in her isolated rural community.
The speaker then compares Lucy to a single star shining as the evening falls:

- The star is ‘Fair’ or beautiful. But Lucy is equally beautiful: ‘Fair as a star’
- The star is unique, the ‘only one shining in the sky’. But Lucy, in her own way, is equally unique.
- We imagine how such a star’s uniqueness might amplify its beauty, how its brightness might be heightened against the twilit evening sky. Similarly, Lucy’s uniqueness makes her seem even more beautiful to the speaker.

The speaker, then, regards Lucy as unique not only in the context of the ‘untrodden ways’ but also in the context of the wider world. There are few people, either in her own isolated community or in the world at large, who can come close to matching the beauty of this extraordinary young woman.

The poet describes Lucy as someone who lived ‘unknown’, receiving no notice or recognition from the wider world. She didn’t achieve the national fame of a leading artist, general or politician. She wasn’t even famous in her own county, like, say, a prominent cricketer, magistrate or business owner.

Hardly any one noticed, then, when Lucy tragically passed away: ‘few could know/ When Lucy ceased to be’. Her death was marked by only a few neighbours around the ‘untrodden ways’. Only they noted that Lucy was now ‘in her grave’. Those in the world beyond this community didn’t know she’d died, or even that she’d ever lived.

The one exception is the speaker himself, who was absolutely devastated by Lucy’s passing. But the speaker doesn’t directly express his heartbreak, instead simply suggesting that Lucy’s passing made a great difference to his life: ‘But she is in her grave and, oh,/ The difference to me!’

Crucial here is the ‘oh’, which suggests a deep weariness and resignation. It’s as if the speaker’s heartbreak is so severe that it can’t be adequately expressed in poetry, as if he’s too sorrowful and weary to put his suffering into words.

**FOCUS ON STYLE**

**Form**
The poem is written in ballad form, featuring four stanzas with an ABAB rhyme scheme. Each stanza had four stresses in its first and third lines and three stresses in its second and fourth lines.

In the preface to his collection of poems *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth declared his preference for plain diction, for the language of everyday men and women. And this poem, like many included in that famous volume, deploys a simple, unfussy vocabulary.

**Metaphor, Simile, Figure of Speech**
‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways’ features two fine comparisons in the second stanza as Wordsworth deploys a metaphor comparing Lucy to a ‘half-hidden’ violet and a simile comparing her to a single star in the evening sky.

**Verbal Music**
‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways’ is rich in assonance. We see this in line 5 with the repeated ‘o’ sounds in ‘violet’, ‘mossy’ and ‘stone’. We also see it in line 7 with the repeated ‘a’ sounds in ‘fair’ as a ‘star’.

**A CLOSER READING**

**SOLITUDE**
Lucy enjoyed an entire lifetime of solitude, hidden away from the eyes of the wider world. She lived in a sparsely populated community where there were ‘very few’ people to know and love her, where the paths were ‘untrodden’ and almost overgrown. We can imagine that Lucy might have gone days without seeing another person.

In Wordsworth’s poetry, solitude is often associated with beauty, peace and creativity. Lucy, we sense, is presented as attractive precisely because she lived an isolated and solitary existence. It is precisely because she is ‘unknown’ and ‘half-hidden’ that she is worthy of such praise. ‘Skating’ is another poem by Wordsworth that celebrates solitude, its young speaker regularly slipping away from his companions to skate alone across the ice.

**ONENESS WITH NATURE**
The speaker, no doubt, is attracted to Lucy partly because she lives in such close harmony with the natural world. She conducts a simple life among ‘untrodden ways’ that have hardly been touched by man. She inhabits an unspoilt world of rocks and trees, of wild flowers and ‘mossy stones’. She is ‘unknown’ to the wider world with its politics and noise, its industry and machines. Such a sense of oneness with the natural world is also experienced by the speaker in both ‘Skating’ and ‘It is a beauteous evening calm and free’.

**A POET’S SENSIBILITY**
‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways’ could be taken as a celebration of poetry, in particular of the poet’s ability to ‘praise’ that which is beautiful and unique. For the poem suggests that only a true poet could adequately pay tribute to Lucy’s inner and outer beauty, capturing in words this most unique young woman. Lucy’s neighbours, who live simple lives beside ‘the springs of Dove’, are simply not equipped for such a task.
The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

_Innisfree:_ a tiny uninhabited island on Lough Gill, Co. Sligo
[2] _Clay and wattles:_ an ancient construction technique known as ‘wattle and daub’, whereby clay is smeared over a frame of interwoven branches
[7] _a purple glow:_ Innisfree comes from the Irish Inis Fraoich, which means ‘island of heather’. Here Yeats imagines the purple heather glowing in the noon sunlight
[8] _linnet’s wings:_ a linnet is a type of finch, typically brown and red-breasted
Tease It Out

1. Where is Innisfree located? Do a Google image search for Innisfree and write a short paragraph describing your impressions. Do you think it’s a wild or calm place, a harsh or pleasant environment? Give reasons for your answer.

2. The poet declares his intention to go and live on Innisfree. Is this a spontaneous decision or something he’s been thinking about for a long time? Give a reason for your answer.

3. What ancient building process will the poet use to construct his cabin on Innisfree? Describe it in your own words.

4. The poet imagines living a self-sufficient life on the island. What different foodstuffs does he imagine growing in order to feed himself?

5. What metaphor does the poet use to describe the mist that drifts across the island each morning? Is it an effective one in your opinion?

6. What word or phrase describes the effect of starlight as it’s reflected in the waters around the island?

7. What sound fills the island as evening comes?

8. What are the Irish origins of the name Innisfree? What does this suggest about the purple glow that fills the island each noon?

9. What sound does the poet claim to hear ‘night and day’?

10. Consider his description of this sound. Do you think he finds it a pleasant one? Do you think it bothers him that he ‘always’ hears this sound, seemingly everywhere he goes?

11. Is he really hearing this sound or does he experience it only in his own imagination?

12. What aspect of the mind or self is suggested by the phrase ‘deep heart’s core’?

13. In what sort of environment is the poet at this moment? How does he feel about this place?

14. **Class Discussion:** The poet states three times that he will ‘go’ and live on Innisfree. Do you think it’s likely that he will actually move to the island and live there? Do you think the poet is serious about changing his life in this way? Or is he merely trying to convince himself that he’s actually capable of such a radical move?

15. Do you think the poet is prepared for the challenges of living a solitary, self-sufficient lifestyle? Or is he being naive about nature, and idealistic about what it means to live in such a remote place? Give reasons for your answer.

Theme Talk

1. In this poem, the poet fantasises about leaving behind the ‘rat race’, the stresses and strains of everyday living. Like hippies and new age travellers, he dreams of living ‘off the grid’, of being completely self-sufficient and detached from modern technology’. Write two paragraphs in response to this statement.

2. ‘And I shall have some peace there’. Identify three words or phrases that emphasise the island’s extreme tranquillity. Is the impression he creates of the island a realistic one, in your opinion?

3. ‘Innisfree is a real place, but it’s also an idea, a state of mind that the speaker can access any time’. Do you agree with this statement? Write a few paragraphs in response.

4. In ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ and ‘An Irish Airman Foresees His Death’, Yeats describes two very different kinds of escape from the everyday world. Compare and contrast how the two poems deal with the themes of escape and solitude.

Language Lab

1. ‘In stanza 2, peace is depicted almost as a physical substance, ‘dropping’ like dew from veils of mist onto the grasses’. Do you agree with this interpretation? Write a few sentences in response.

2. ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ uses repetition to great effect. In particular, the phrase ‘I will arise and go now’ has great power when repeated in the final stanza. Suggest how the meaning and tone of this line changes between stanza 1 and stanza 3.

3. This poem makes extensive use of assonance and alliteration to create a beguiling verbal music, such as in line 3: ‘Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee’. Can you identify another example of assonance and another example of alliteration in the poem?

4. This poem is alive with the sounds of nature. List all the sounds the poet describes. In your opinion, which is the most effective description? Give a reason for your answer.
FIRST ENCOUNTER

Stanza 1
The poem opens with a dramatic declaration of intent. It’s as if the poet has suddenly made a decision. It’s as if he’s suddenly realised that he’s had enough of modern living and that a change of direction is needed. And this new existence, he declares, will begin immediately, for he’s going to stand up any minute now and embark on a new chapter in his life: ‘I will arise and go now’. He even emphasises this intention by repeating it in Stanza 3.

Yeats declares his intention to go off and live on the island of Innisfree, a small uninhabited island on Lough Gill in County Sligo. He imagines he would live a very simple life once he gets there:

• He would live ‘alone’ in a clearing or glade upon the island.
• He would build his own cabin: ‘And a small cabin build there’. This would be a very basic type of accommodation. It would be ‘small’. It would be manufactured using the ancient ‘wattle and daub’ technique, which involves smearing mud over interwoven sticks and twigs.
• He would even produce his own food, keeping bees for their honey and growing rows of beans: ‘Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee’.

Yeats, then, seems to imagine living ‘off the grid’, going without the amenities and conveniences of his time. He imagines a life without telephones and telegraphs, with no newspapers or postal service, without the primitive gas and electrical services that were available in 1890s Dublin and London.

Stanza 2
The poet imagines the great beauty of Innisfree, taking us through a day on the island from dawn to dusk to midnight:

• The poet would wake each day to the pleasant chirping sounds of crickets: ‘where the cricket sings’.
• He uses a wonderful metaphor to describe the banks of mist that drift across the island each morning, comparing them to ‘veils’ that drift and disperse, momentarily obscuring the island’s beauty as they pass: ‘the veils of the morning’.
• Noon, too, is beautiful. Sunlight glitters on the heather that covers much of the island and gives it its name. (‘Inis Fraoich’, in Irish, means island of the heather). This glittering heather lends the whole place a ‘purple glow’.
• Evenings on Innisfree are ‘full’ of the sound made by linnets (small brown finches common in the west of Ireland) as they flit around the island: ‘And evening full of the linnet’s wings’.
• Midnight, meanwhile, sees the starlight reflected on Lough Gill, so that its waters glitter and gleam: ‘There midnight’s all a glimmer’.

Stanza 3
The poet claims that the sound of Innisfree’s beaches, of ‘lake water lapping’ on the island’s shores, is always in his mind’s ear. Like a catchy song he can’t get out of his head, these ‘low sounds’ of water are ‘always’ present at the back of his mind.
They repeat over and over again, ‘night and day’; we sense that the poet couldn’t make them stop even if he wanted to.

These lines, then, emphasise the intensity of the poet’s attachment to the little island. The lapping sound of its water echoes in the very ‘core’ of his heart, in the depths of his being or psyche. No matter where he goes, the sound of its waters is ever-present at the very centre of his mind, forming a kind of background music as he lives his life. But the thought of Innisfree, it seems, is especially important to the poet when he finds himself in an urban environment: ‘While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey’. We can imagine how the cold grey concrete makes him long for the island’s beauty. We can imagine how the city’s endless racket makes him long for that soothing, almost silent retreat.

Yeats, it’s worth noting, was inspired to write the poem when he was living in London and was feeling homesick for his beloved Sligo. He was walking down Fleet Street, one of that city’s busiest thoroughfares, when he saw a fountain in a shop window, which ‘balanced a little ball upon its jet’. The trickling sound of the fountain reminded him of Innisfree’s lapping waters and sparked the beginning of the poem.

**FOCUS ON STYLE**

**Verbal Music**

The poem contains many examples of assonance and alliteration. Assonance features in the second line, with its broad vowel sounds: ‘a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made’. It is also evident in line 7, where the repeated ‘i’ and ‘o’ sounds create a soft musical effect: ‘midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow’. The repeated ‘a’ and ‘o’ sounds in line 10 have a similar musical quality: ‘I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore’. Combined with the alliteration of the ‘l’ sounds, these techniques make this line very pleasant to the ear.

**Imagery**

‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ is a poem of contrasting imagery. There is a stark difference between the imagery of the city and the imagery of Innisfree. The city is a drab and dull place, composed of roadways and ‘pavements grey’. The island, in contrast, is alive with colour and sound. We can contrast the ‘purple glow’ of the heather with the ‘pavements grey’. However, the city seems a very real place, while the island comes across as more of an imagined paradise.

**Tone, Mood and Atmosphere**

In his descriptions of Innisfree, Yeats creates a very peaceful, almost drowsy atmosphere. His days will be marked by the humming of bees and crickets. It is a place where ‘peace comes dropping slow’, where he can relax and be alone in nature. However, we also suspect that this is a highly idealised version of Innisfree. Were Yeats to actually go and try to live on the island by himself, the reality might be very different.

**THEMES**

**NATURE**

**Nature’s Beauty**

This is one of Yeats’ best-loved nature poems. Innisfree is depicted as a place of sublime tranquillity. It’s a place of great silence, devoid of any man-made sound.

Innisfree, then, is where the poet will discover the peace he so craves: ‘And I shall have some peace there’. Yeats, in a wonderful turn of phrase, presents peace as a physical substance, ‘dropping’ in the form of dew to cover the entire island. Peace, we’re told, ‘comes dropping’ slowly from the banks of mist that cover the island each morning, drenching the grasses where the crickets are busy about their song.

**Getting Back to Nature**

There are moments when each of us feels like escaping the ‘rat race’ that all-too-often constitutes modern living. We may feel, as Yeats suggests in Stanza 3, like trading in the cacophony of city living, with its endless traffic noise and car alarms, for a place of tranquillity where ‘peace comes dropping slow’. We may feel, as Yeats does in this poem, that it’s time to turn our backs on the stresses and strains of modern living, of exams and deadlines, and of career pressure and social obligations.

We may even fantasise about going off the grid completely, about living without media and devices, even without electricity. Some people even fantasise, as Yeats does here, about being completely self-sufficient, about growing their own food and building their own simple dwelling places.

Innisfree, as the poet describes it, is a place of fantasy, an idealised almost heavenly version of the actual island in County Sligo. It’s a place where the poet can live out his dream of escape from modern life. But fantasy is the operative word. For we sense that Yeats, like most people, wouldn’t last more than a week living alone and self-sufficiently upon Lough Gill. Think of the harsh winters, the difficulty of growing crops, the isolation, and the lack of warmth and electricity.

We sense, then, that the poet won’t really follow through on this decision to ‘arise and go’. We sense that this departure for Innisfree won’t happen now and probably never will, and we also sense that that the poet isn’t quite prepared to leave the modern world behind and embrace what today we’d describe today as a hippy or New Age lifestyle. However, such fantasies can be important. For the poet, this dream of the simple life serves as a comfort or escape when times get tough. When the rat race proves too draining, when he tires of the grey city pavements, he can always daydream about his bean rows on the island of Innisfree.
The Russian Doll

Her colours caught my eye.
Mixed by the light of a far off sun:
carmine, turmeric, indigo, purple —
they promised to spell us dry weather.

I’d a fiver in my pocket; that’s
all they asked for. And gift wrapped her.
It had been grey all month and damp.
We felt every year in our bones

and our dead had been too much with us.
January almost over. Bitter.
I carried her home like a Holy Fire
the seven miles from the town,

my face to a wind from the north. Saw
the first primroses in the maw of a fallen oak.
There was smoke from the chimney
when I came through the woods

and, though I had spent the dinner,
I knew you’d love your gaudy doll,
you’d love what’s in her
at the end of your seventh winter.

Annotations
[3] carmine: a vivid red or crimson colour
[3] turmeric: a yellow powder, used as a spice to flavour particular foods
[11] Holy Fire: a miracle event for Orthodox Christians that is said to occur each year on Holy Saturday. According to tradition, the Holy Fire ignites from the tomb of Jesus Christ at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem
[14] maw: jaws or throat of a hungry animal
[18] gaudy: unpleasantly bright in colour or decoration
Tease It Out

1. Do you know what a Russian Doll is? Do a quick Google search to find out.
2. Think about a time when you gave a small but thoughtful gift to someone else. Can you remember your reason for buying it?
3. What time of year was it when the speaker bought the doll? What was the weather like at the time? What had the weather been like ‘all month’?
4. The speaker says that it was the doll’s colours that ‘caught’ her eye. What colour was the doll?
5. The speaker says that the colours were ‘Mixed by the light of a far off sun’. Why do you think she says this? What does this suggest about the doll’s origins?
6. What special power was the doll said to possess? Who do you think made the speaker aware of this?
7. The speaker only had a ‘fiver’ in her pocket but says this is ‘all they asked for’. Do you think the trader was being fair with her or do you think he took advantage of her? Do you think the fact that he ‘gift wrapped’ the doll was a gesture of kindness or a ploy to make her feel she had got a good deal?
8. ‘We felt every year in our bones/ and our dead had been too much with us’. What do these lines suggest about the kind of life the speaker lives? Do you think that the speaker has an easy life?
9. How far does the speaker live from the town in which the doll was purchased? How do you think the speaker travelled home?
10. The doll is described as something miraculous – it is ‘like a Holy Fire’. Why do you think the speaker felt this way about the doll?
11. What evidence of spring did the speaker observe on the way home?
12. What indicated to the speaker that home was near?
13. The speaker said that ‘I spent the dinner’. What is meant by this?
14. What word does the speaker use to describe the doll in the final stanza?
15. The speaker says, ‘you’d love what’s in her’. What do you think is inside the doll?
16. What age was the speaker’s daughter at the time?

Theme Talk

1. Write two paragraphs describing a long walk home after school on a bitterly cold winter’s day. In your piece, consider including details about the wintry environment and what sort of things you might be looking forward to when you get in.
2. Pretend you are a seven-year-old girl and you have just received this gift of the Russian doll. Write a journal entry about it, in which you describe your delight at receiving it, what it looks like, and what you like most about it.

Language Lab

1. Meehan’s poem offers us many strong and colourful images. Which image in the poem is, in your opinion, the most vivid and evocative? Give reasons for your answer.
2. How would you characterise the mood and atmosphere of this poem? Back up your answer with quotes from the text.
FIRST ENCOUNTER

When Paula Meehan was seven years old, she received a gift of a matroyshka doll from her grandmother. The doll became one of Meehan’s most special possessions and is referenced several times in her poetry. For Meehan, the doll serves as a symbol of poetry, creativity and imagination.

The poem is set in the winter of 1962. January, the grandmother tells us, is ‘almost over’. The weather has been very bad: ‘It had been grey all month and damp’. It has been a time of ‘Bitter’ cold. The long winter has taken its toll on the speaker’s family. She describes how her family ‘felt every year in [their] bones’, suggesting that the endless grey months had left them exhausted in both body and mind.

The grandmother’s household, then, are feeling pretty low. And in this depressed state they’ve been thinking about loved ones that have passed away over the years. The grandmother seems to think that the family have become too melancholic, have been dwelling too much on those who have passed on: ‘our dead had been too much with us’. She seems to think that the family need cheering up, that they need to re-focus on the future and what it holds.

The grandmother has journeyed into town to buy food for the family. While shopping, she notices a Russian doll in one of the shop windows. This is a ‘matroyshka’, a set of hollow wooden dolls of various sizes. The second largest doll is placed inside the largest, and so on.

The grandmother is attracted by the doll’s bright colours: ‘Her colours caught my eye’. She mentions carmine (red), turmeric (deep yellow-orange), indigo (bright blue) and purple. The doll’s colours make her think of faraway lands that are filled with warmth and sunlight, weather conditions very different to this bleak Irish January.

As she looks at the doll, the grandmother is gripped by a flight of fancy. She finds herself thinking of the doll as a lucky charm or even as an enchanted, magical item. She fantasises that the doll, with its colours so redolent of warmer climes, could cast a spell that would bring ‘dry weather’. She imagines that buying the doll could somehow hurry spring along for her long-suffering family.

On the spur of the moment, then, the grandmother decides to purchase the doll. It costs five pounds, which is all the money she has with her: ‘I’d a fiver in my pocket: that’s/ all they asked for’. She must choose, then, between...
buying dinner for her family or buying the doll. She chooses the doll, deciding that it will make a great gift for her grandchild.

Is it a coincidence that the doll cost five pounds, which is precisely the amount of money that the grandmother had with her? The grandmother, no doubt, bargained with the shopkeeper, getting him down to a price she could afford. She even prevailed on him to gift wrap the doll into the bargain.

The grandmother, having spent all her money, must walk the seven miles from town back to where she lives. The weather is still unpleasant, with a cold northerly breeze blowing into her face as she makes her way home. As she walks, however, she notices the ‘first primroses’ of the year, an early indication that spring is on its way.

The speaker passes through the woods that surround her family’s home. She sees smoke rising from the chimney of her house. She is returning without the food she went out to buy in the first place. For she has ‘spent the dinner’, has spent the money that was intended to feed the family that night. They must now go hungry or make do with whatever leftovers remain in the house.

The grandmother, however, doesn’t regret her decision. She’s delighted to have come home with the brightly coloured matroyshka doll, this beautiful gift for her grandchild.

**FOCUS ON STYLE**

**Simile**

In a wonderful turn of phrase, the grandmother compares the matroyshka to a ‘Holy Fire’. It is as if she is carrying a candle that had been lit from some sacred temple flame. This suggests the care with which she carries the doll home; she’s like someone trying to keep a candle ablaze in the teeth of a gale. It also suggests the high regard she has for this wooden object; to her is is something almost miraculous.

**A CLOSER READING**

**A PORTRAIT OF THE GRANDMOTHER**

This poem provides a powerful portrait of the grandmother.

- This is a tough, practical woman, who lived in difficult times. We see this toughness and practicality when she bargains with the shopkeeper and when she uncomplainingly walks the seven miles home.
- The grandmother also comes across as someone deeply concerned about the welfare of her family. She is aware that this winter has been difficult on them and that they need something to lighten their moods.
- She also comes across as selfless. She goes without food and walks the seven miles home so she can afford this gift for her grandchild.

There is also a dreamy or imaginative side to the grandmother’s personality. She’s captivated by the doll’s colours and imagines that it will bring ‘dry weather’ into the lives of her family. Perhaps she even imagines that this ‘spell’ is working when while walking home from town she spies the first primroses of spring. She carries the doll with great care, as if it were a sacred object: ‘I carried her home like a Holy Fire’. The grandmother, however, downplays her reaction to the doll, referring to it as ‘gaudy’. She wants to maintain her tough, practical exterior. She doesn’t want her family to know that she responded to the doll in such an intensely emotional fashion.

**THE GRANDDAUGHTER AND THE DOLL**

This practical grandmother, then, makes what seems like a very impractical decision, choosing a wooden doll instead of food for her family. But she knows immediately that her grandchild will be very taken with the matroyshka doll: ‘I knew you’d love your gaudy doll’. The doll is intended as more than a simple treat for the grandchild, something to lift her spirits after a long winter. For the grandmother understands that the doll will trigger something in the grandchild. She recognises that the grandchild has a sensitive, poetic nature and will respond to this object in a profound way.

**THE DOLL AS A SYMBOL OF POETRY**

The doll serves also as an embodiment of poetry itself. It is associated with colour and with fire, which are ancient symbols of creativity. We can imagine the child exploring the matroyshka, opening each doll to reveal another one inside. This suggests, of course, how poems contain hidden depths or layers of meaning.

The grandmother is convinced that her granddaughter will love ‘what’s in’ the matroyshka. For what it contains is not only a series of dolls but also the gift of poetry itself. For the matroyshka, we sense, fired the young girl’s creativity and played a role in her becoming the poet she is today.
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Sample Pages >>>>
Chapter 2: Paragraphs

What is a paragraph?

A PARAGRAPH IS A COLLECTION OF SENTENCES THAT RELATE TO THE SAME IDEA.

- The subject or topic of a paragraph is often stated in the first sentence, which is called a ‘topic’ sentence.
- The remaining sentences develop this idea and are known as ‘body’ sentences.
- The paragraph is unified, with all the sentences contributing to create a single idea.
- A paragraph is complete when the idea the writer wants to express is brought clearly into focus.

When you write for the Leaving Cert it is vital that you use paragraphs correctly.
Few things are capable of affecting us more than alcohol. Just like the influence of the moon on the tides, the command drink has on us is both profound and predictable. Every weekend, scores of us pour onto the streets at night and what follows for many hours after, with the aid of alcohol, is a picture of human stupidity. It seems that no-one is immune. Our A&Es are choked with men and women of all ages who have fallen victim to its unpleasant side effects – drink-driving tragedies, violent brawls and alcohol-related illness. It is an ugly, embarrassing scene and no amount of bravado or cheer can alter this fact.

Sometimes, however, it may be more natural for the topic sentence to be the second or third sentence. In the following examples, the topic sentence is the third sentence:

I can remember the stiff feel of the shoes around my feet and the smell of the crisp pages of my new books. I can still feel the anxiety zinging around my stomach as my dad walked me through those imposing gates. My first day of school may have been 14 years ago now, but it has yet to leave my memory. It is something that I remember with particular clarity every September, when I pass the primary school and see the new junior infants waddling into classrooms and wailing for their parents.
Maybe it’s the sensation of sand sliding across your feet. Or maybe it’s the promise of a good night’s sleep after a day spent breathing in the salty sea air. Whatever the key to its allure, I am an avid fan of the beach. I’ve spent my whole life waking up and falling asleep to the swish of the waves on the shore. I’ve left a million footprints in the sand and skimmed a thousand stones across the water. To sit on top of a dune and watch the sun set late on a summer evening is, for me and many others, a little slice of heaven.

As a rule of thumb, however, it is best to have the topic sentence as the first sentence in the paragraph.

How long should a paragraph be?

Your paragraphs should be as long as they need to be but not a sentence longer. Each paragraph should be concerned with one central idea. When you’ve said all you wish to communicate regarding that idea it’s time to move on and begin your next paragraph.

There is, therefore, no ‘correct’ length for a paragraph, no rule that says paragraphs should be seven, eight or ten sentences in length. Again and again students make the mistake of writing paragraphs that go on and on. They continue droning about the paragraph’s topic long after they’ve exhausted everything meaningful they have to say about it. Or they write endless paragraphs that ‘mash up’ many different ideas in a way that’s confusing and irritating for the reader. The best way to avoid such mistakes is to plan your composition carefully.

How do I start a new paragraph?

There are two ways to start a new paragraph. You can indent its first line:

In my opinion, schools need to seriously consider starting up classes in coding and programming. All we are hearing in newspapers and reports is how we need to invest in the ‘smart economy’ to fix the country. The experts are telling us that the IT industry is booming and Ireland has, indeed, attracted top technology companies to its shores. And yet, bizarrely, there is also a shortage in the number of people with these IT skills. Many people, we are told, are not ‘technically literate’ and this prevents them from getting any of the thousands of IT jobs that are available in Ireland. This seems absurd when so many people, both young and old, are forced to emigrate to earn a living.

Is it right that our education system offers slightly arcane subjects such as Classical Studies and Japanese at Leaving Cert level and yet does not offer courses in coding, programing, graphic design, or even ECD? Should we be offering strictly academic subjects like religion, art history or Latin and yet ignore subjects for which there is a strong demand? With all due respect to the linguistic whiz kids out there, perhaps the languages we should be focusing on now are C++, JavaScript and Ruby?

Alternatively you can skip a line:

In my opinion, schools need to seriously consider starting up classes in coding and programming. All we are hearing in newspapers and reports is how we need to invest in the ‘smart economy’ to fix the country. The experts are telling us that the IT industry is booming and Ireland has, indeed, attracted top technology companies to its shores. And yet, bizarrely, there is also a shortage in the number of people with these IT skills. Many people, we are told, are not ‘technically literate’ and this prevents them from getting any of the thousands of IT jobs that are available in Ireland. This seems absurd when so many people, both young and old, are forced to emigrate to earn a living.

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Whichever of these paragraph styles you use is entirely up to yourself, but it is important that you are consistent. If you start using an indented style, use the indented style throughout your essay, and the same applies for the skipped-line style.
Exercises

1. What is the function of a ‘topic’ sentence in a paragraph?

2. What are ‘body’ sentences? How do these relate to ‘topic’ sentences?

3. Arrange the following sentences so that they form a coherent paragraph:

This is a lot for a five-year-old to deal with, but it all goes to hell in a basket when mom or dad announce that they’re leaving and you have to survive the day without them.
The uniforms are uncomfortable.
Those new faces and names inspire intense shyness and social anxiety.
Few things in life traumatise a child more than his or her first day at school.
Everything about it is new and overwhelming.

4. Arrange the following sentences so that they form a coherent paragraph:

Every paragraph brings you deeper into the minds of characters who can go on to feel like your best friend or your worst nightmare.
When you turn the first page you embark on a thrilling adventure, and when you finally close the last one, you mourn its ending and are left hungry for more.
Nothing is more satisfying than delving into a great book.
You simply cannot have the same love affair with a movie or television series that you can have with a good novel.

5. Arrange the following sentences so that they form a coherent paragraph:

But here’s the truth: they once had to start at the same rung of the ladder as you.
We don’t always feel like pulling on those shorts and runners and heading out into the cold.
Physical fitness is a challenging but worthwhile pursuit.
The prospect becomes even less appealing when you know that you’ll have to puff and pant and sweat for an hour or so.
And those lithe athletes you see swanning effortlessly around don’t make you feel any better about yourself.

6. Arrange the following sentences so that they form a coherent paragraph:

He possesses all of the qualities of a great anti-hero. His vigilante activities are fuelled primarily out of a desire for revenge. He is not always idealistic or courageous. Batman is one of the finest anti-heroes to grace the pages of a comic book. His intent is not to comfort the people of Gotham City with his crusade, more to terrify its villains — often with brute force and morally dubious tactics. This is what makes him so compelling.
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Sample Pages >>>>
Enter OTHELLO, IAGO, and Attendants with torches

IAGO

Though in the trade of war I have slain men,
Yet do I hold it very stuff o’ the conscience
To do no contrived murder: I lack iniquity
Sometimes to do me service: nine or ten times
I had thought to have yerk’d him here under the ribs.

OTHELLO

’Tis better as it is.

IAGO

Nay, but he prated,
And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms
Against your honour
That, with the little godliness I have,
I did full hard forbear him. But, I pray you, sir,
Are you fast married? Be assured of this,
That the magnifico is much beloved,
And hath in his effect a voice potential
As double as the Duke’s: he will divorce you;
Or put upon you what restraint and grievance
The law, with all his might to enforce it on,
Will give him cable.

OTHELLO

Let him do his spite:
My services which I have done the signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints. ’Tis yet to know –
Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,
I shall promulgate – I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach’d: for know, Iago,
But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea’s worth. But, look! what lights come yond?

IAGO

Those are the raised father and his friends:
You were best go in.

OTHELLO

Not I – I must be found:
My parts, my title and my perfect soul
Shall manifest me rightly. Is it they?

IAGO

By Janus, I think no.

Enter CASSIO, and certain Officers with torches

OTHELLO

The servants of the Duke, and my lieutenant.
The goodness of the night upon you, friends!
What is the news?

CASSIO

The Duke does greet you, general,
And he requires your haste-post-haste appearance,
Even on the instant.

OTHELLO

What is the matter, think you?
CASSIO | Something from Cyprus as I may divine:
  | It is a business of some heat: the galleys
  | Have sent a dozen sequent messengers
  | This very night at one another’s heels,
  | And many of the consuls, raised and met,
  | Are at the duke’s already: you have been
  | hotly call’d for;
  | When, being not at your lodging to be found,
  | The senate hath sent about three several guests
  | To search you out.

OTHELLO | ’Tis well I am found by you.
  | I will but spend a word here in the house,
  | And go with you.

Exit

CASSIO | Ensign, what makes he here?
IAGO | ’Faith, he tonight hath boarded a land carack:
  | If it prove lawful prize, he’s made for ever.
CASSIO | I do not understand.
IAGO | He’s married.
CASSIO | To who?
IAGO | Marry, to –

Re-enter OTHHELLO

OTHELLO | Come, captain, will you go?
CASSIO | Here comes another troop to seek for you.
IAGO | It is Brabantio. General, be advised;
  | He comes to bad intent.

Enter BRABANTIO, RODERIGO, and Officers with torches and weapons

OTHELLO | Holla! stand there!
RODERIGO | Signior, it is the Moor.
BRABANTIO | Down with him, thief!

IAGO | You, Roderigo! come, sir, I am for you.
OTHELLO | Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.
  | Good signior, you shall more command with years
  | Than with your weapons.

BRABANTIO | O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow’d my daughter?
  | Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her;
  | For I’ll refer me to all things of sense,
  | If she in chains of magic were not bound,
  | Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,
  | So opposite to marriage that she shunned
  | The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
  | Would ever have, to incur a general mock,
  | Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
  | Of such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight.
  | Judge me the world, if ’tis not gross in sense
  | That thou hast practised on her with foul charms,
  | Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals
  | That weaken motion: I’ll have’t disputed on;
  | ’Tis probable and palpable to thinking,
  | I therefore apprehend and do attach thee
  | For an abuser of the world, a practiser
  | Of arts inhibited and out of warrant.
Lay hold upon him: if he do resist, 
Subdue him at his peril.

**OTHELLO**

Hold your hands, 
Both you of my inclining, and the rest: 
Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it 
Without a prompter. Where will you that I go 
To answer this your charge?

**BRABANTIO**

To prison, till fit time 
Of law and course of direct session 
Call thee to answer.

**OTHELLO**

What if I do obey? 
How may the Duke be therewith satisfied, 
Whose messengers are here about my side, 
Upon some present business of the state 
To bring me to him?

**First Officer**

'Tis true, most worthy signior; 
The Duke's in council and your noble self, 
I am sure, is sent for.

**BRABANTIO**

How! The Duke in council! 
In this time of the night! Bring him away: 
Mine's not an idle cause: the Duke himself, 
Or any of my brothers of the state, 
Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own; 
For if such actions may have passage free, 
Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.

*Exeunt*
LINE BY LINE

IAGO AND OTHELLO SPEAK

Iago is with Othello on a street in Venice. He tells Othello that Roderigo has been saying unpleasant things about him: ‘he prated,/ And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms/ Against your honour’ (6-8). Iago claims that when he heard these insulting comments he felt like stabbing Roderigo: ‘I had thought to have yerk’d him here under the ribs’ (5). However, though he has killed many times in battle, premeditated murder is not something he is capable of: ‘I hold it very stuff o’th conscience/ To do no contrived murder’ (2-3). He tells Othello that he lacks the necessary wickedness sometimes to do what is necessary: ‘I lack iniquity Sometimes to do me service’ (3-4).

Othello is unshaken by all of this:
- He is sure that the services he has done the state in battle will outweigh any grievance that Brabantio might have about his marriage: ‘My services, which I have done the signory,/ Shall out-tongue his complaints’ (18-19).

ACTION

Iago tells Othello that Roderigo has been saying unpleasant things about him and that Brabantio now knows of his marriage to Desdemona. Othello says that he has nothing to be ashamed of and that his good character will ensure that the senator cannot harm him. Cassio comes to tell Othello that he is urgently needed at the Duke’s – a situation is brewing in Cyprus and a council has convened to decide what action is required. Brabantio and his men find Othello and seek to arrest him, accusing him of using witchcraft to lure Desdemona. Othello tells Brabantio that the Duke has called upon him to attend an urgent meeting and it is best they go there to address any grievance the senator might have.

TALK ABOUT IT

In the opening scene we heard a lot about Othello from Iago and Roderigo. Do their descriptions match the character we meet in the second scene?
His merits make him more than worthy of marriage to Desdemona: ‘my demerits/ May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune/ As this’ (22-4).

He also loves Desdemona and would not have given up the freedom of being a bachelor for anyone less than she: ‘I would not my unhoused free condition/ Put into circumscription and confine/ For the sea’s worth’ (26-8).

DIGNITY AND SELF-POSSESSION

Despite being provoked, insulted and threatened in this scene, Othello remains calm and self-possessed at all times:

- When Iago tries to incense him with tales of Roderigo saying terrible things about him, Othello refuses to get wound up. It is best, he tells Iago, that the ensign didn’t resort to violence on his behalf: ‘‘Tis better as it is’ (6).
- When he hears that Brabantio wishes to have him divorced or make him suffer for marrying his daughter, Othello tells Iago to let him do what he wishes: ‘Let him do his spite’ (17).
- When it seems that Brabantio and his men are approaching, Othello refuses to run and hide, though this is what Iago tells him to do: ‘Not I – I must be found’ (30).
- When Brabantio and his men do arrive and swords are raised, Othello tells everyone to lower their weapons and suggests to Brabantio that his age will command more respect than the weapons he brings: ‘Good signor, you shall more command with years/ Than with your weapons’ (62-3).
- Though Brabantio insults him and accuses him of practicing ‘arts inhibited and out of warrent’ Othello never loses his temper, calmly asking the senator where he would like him to go to answer these charges: ‘Where will you that I go/ To answer this your charge?’ (86-7).

We also get a sense of Othello’s pride and dignity in this scene. He tells Iago that it is not well known that he is descended from royalty: ‘‘Tis yet to know...I fetch my life and being/ From men of royal seige’ (19-22). This, however, is not something he wishes to broadcast or boast about: ‘when I know that boasting is an honour,/ I shall promulgate’ (20-1).

Othello is proud of what he has achieved and is sure that his actions will speak against any accusations or threats the senator is likely to bring: ‘My services, which I have done the signory,/ Shall out-tongue his complaints’ (18-9). He is not someone who runs and hides when things look set to get difficult. When Iago tells him to hide from Brabantio, Othello says that he will stay and face the senator: ‘My parts, my title, and my perfect soul/ Shall manifest me rightly’ (31-2). His merits also make him more than worthy of marriage to Desdemona: ‘my demerits/ May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune/ As this that I have reach’d’ (22-4).
age commands more respect than the weapons he brings: ‘Good signor, you shall more command with years/ Than with your weapons’ (62-3).

**LINES 55-61: BRABANTIO CONFRONTS OTHELLO**

Brabantio is in no mood to calm down:
- He calls Othello a ‘foul thief’ and accuses him of stealing his daughter away: ‘where hast thou stow’d my daughter’ (64).
- He says that Othello is someone who practices forbidden and illegal arts: ‘a practiser/ Of arts inhibited and out of warrant’ (80-1). Othello used this black magic to take possession of Desdemona: ‘thou hast enchanted her’ (65).
- He accuses Othello of using medicines to weaken his daughter’s will: ‘Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals/ That weaken motion’ (76-7).
- Any reasonable person, he says, will see immediately that his daughter must be under some dark spell: ‘For I’ll refer me to all things of sense,/ If she in chains of magic were not bound’ (66-7).

Desdemona is a beautiful and fortunate girl, someone who enjoys the guardianship of a loving father. Why, Brabantio asks, would she leave the safety of her home, open herself to ridicule, to be with a man like Othello, someone inspires fear rather than delight? ‘Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy...Would ever have, to incur a general mock,/ Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as thou – to fear, not to delight?’ (68-73). After all, Desdemona was someone so opposed to marriage that she turned down offers from the wealthiest Venetian men: ‘So opposite to marriage that she shunned/ The wealthy curled darlings of our nation’ (69-70).

Brabantio calls on his men to arrest Othello and bring him to jail. Othello tells the senator that it would not please the Duke if he was to be taken to prison this night – he has just been called upon to attend an urgent meeting of the state. Brabantio is surprised to hear that the Duke is holding council so late at night but is not willing to let the issue of his daughter’s marriage rest. He says that the Duke and other senior members of government will sympathise with him when they hear of what Othello has done. If men such as Othello are free to behave in the manner he has just described then the future statesmen of the city will be ‘Bond-slaves and pagans’ (101).

**TALK ABOUT IT**

Do you think that Brabantio’s anger is justified and his speech reasonable given the way his daughter has just behaved?

---

Little does Othello know that it was Iago who spoke ill of him and helped Roderigo rouse the sleeping senator with the news of the marriage.

**NO RESPECT FOR MORALS AND VALUES**

In this scene Iago presents himself as a moral person, someone with strong values.
- He claims to be outraged at Roderigo insulting Othello’s honour (6-10).
- He says that premeditated murder is something he abhors and would never commit: ‘I hold it very stuff o’th’ conscience/ To do no contrived murder’ (2-3).
- He says that he is not wicked by nature: ‘I lack iniquity/ Sometimes to do me service’ (3-4).
- He says that he wanted to stab Roderigo for bad-mouthing Othello but was incapable of acting in this manner (3-5).

But this is all just an act, a conscious effort to present himself in a certain way to Othello. As the play progresses we will see that Iago has little or no time for the morals and values he pretends here to uphold.
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DID PEOPLE REALLY TALK LIKE THAT?
Shakespeare uses literary devices that ordinary Elizabethan people would not have used in their everyday speech. For example:

Iambic pentameter
A form of blank verse where each line contains five regular beats. An example is Romeo’s line from the balcony scene: ‘But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?/ It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.’ (2.2.2-3) Try tapping on the table five times as you say these lines; you should be able to hear the rhythm.

Rhymed verse
Shakespeare sometimes uses rhyming couplets; for example, when Romeo first sees Juliet: ‘Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight,/ For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night.’ (1.5.51-2)

Prose
Sometimes the dialogue is unversed and has no line breaks, much like the dialogue in a modern play. We see this when Mercutio is talking to Romeo: ‘Why, is not this better now than groaning for love? Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo, now art thou what thou art’. (2.4.85-7)

WHY DID SHAKESPEARE WRITE IN VERSE?
Shakespeare’s use of verse in dialogue was an accepted convention of theatre, similar to the way the audience of a musical suspends its disbelief when the actors burst into song. The use of verse gives the scenes a sense of heightened drama, but it also served a practical purpose; in Shakespeare’s time, a company of actors might only have had a few copies of the script between them, and verse made it easier for the actors to remember their lines.

It’s important to note that not all the characters in Romeo and Juliet speak the same way. Most of the characters are members of the nobility and speak in verse, highlighting the formal speech of the upper classes. Romeo speaks in verse most of the time, but when he’s with his friends Mercutio and Benvolio, he drops the verse and begins talking in prose. Other characters, like the servants, don’t speak in verse at all. Their dialogue might give us a sense of how ordinary people actually spoke in Shakespeare’s time.

DID SHAKESPEARE’S AUDIENCE UNDERSTAND IT?
Yes. Some words Shakespeare uses frequently – ‘anon’, ‘fain’, ‘knave’, ‘prate’, ‘prithee’, ‘thence’, ‘wherefore’ etc – are now obsolete and unfamiliar to a modern audience. However, the Elizabethan audience would have readily understood these words as part of their everyday speech.

They would also have understood the historical and cultural references that are obscure to us today. For example, they would have known immediately that biting your thumb at someone (1.1.40) was a very rude gesture and that ‘cotquean’ (4.4.6) was an insult. They would also have been familiar with festivals like Lammastide, (1.3.15) old folk tales such as that of King Cophetua, (2.1.14) and proverbs like ‘the longer liver take all.’ (1.5.15)
The rhythms of speech were different in Shakespeare’s time. The English of the 16th century is known as early modern English. It was very similar to today’s English, but the sentence structures were often longer and more complicated. Elizabethan audiences were used to listening to long, complex speeches, particularly since many of them could not read or write, and oral communication was how they got most of their news and information.

However, it would be untrue to say that Elizabethan audiences understood every line. Shakespeare was inventive with language and notorious for making up his own words. He was also a poet, and perhaps some of his more complex imagery might have gone over the audience’s heads. However, the performances of the actors would have helped the audience to understand the gist, if not the exact meaning, of Shakespeare’s lines.

**WHAT’S THE STORY WITH THEE, THOU & THY?**
You’ve probably noticed that Shakespeare sometimes uses pronouns which are no longer in use: ‘thee’ and ‘thou’, which mean ‘you’, and ‘thy’ and ‘thine’, which mean ‘your(s)’. In Elizabethan times, ‘thee’ and ‘thy’ were used when speaking to friends, family or people you knew well. ‘You’ and ‘your’ were the polite forms, used when speaking to someone you didn’t know well or who was of a higher social class. However, Shakespeare isn’t very consistent and uses both forms interchangeably; for example, Benvolio uses both ‘you’ and ‘thee’ when talking to Romeo in Act 1 Scene 1.

**HOW TO READ THE PLAY**
Settling down to read Shakespeare, with its use of verse and archaic words, can be a shock to the system. Here’s some advice on how to read the play:

- **Don’t be intimidated**
  It’s important to remember that Shakespeare wrote for everyone, from kings and queens to the ordinary man and woman on the street. His plays were popular entertainment, and he included plenty of jokes, puns, fights and love scenes to keep his audience happy. Try to approach *Romeo and Juliet* as you would any story about young love and teenage rebellion, and try not to be put off by the occasionally tricky language.

- **Take your time**
  Reading Shakespeare takes practice. Read slowly and don’t expect to understand everything that’s being said immediately. As you read the text, consult the annotations in the margins for explanations of difficult words and phrases.

- **Read it aloud**
  Try reading the text aloud. Even though large sections of the play are written in verse, remember that there isn’t necessarily a pause at the end of each line. Pauses are usually indicated by punctuation – commas, full stops, dashes and semi-colons. Pay attention to these pauses, and you should be able to find the correct rhythm of the text.

- **Watch performances**
  Shakespeare could never have imagined that his work would be studied in classrooms hundreds of years after his death. He might even have been horrified at the notion! He wrote plays like *Romeo and Juliet* to be watched, not read. Watching performances of Shakespeare plays can hugely enhance your understanding and enjoyment of them. A great director can bring the story and setting to life, and a great actor can deliver the lines in a way that makes the meaning clear.

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**SHAKESPEARE SPEAK**
Shakespeare coined many words and phrases that are still in use today:

- advertising
- assassination
- bubble
- critic
- dwindle
- eyesore
- obscene
- outbreak
- radiance
- reclusive
- stealthy
- submerge
- suspicious
- unreal
- as luck would have it
- break the ice
- dead as a doornail
- elbow room
- full circle
- good riddance
- in stitches
- into thin air
- laughing stock
- one fell swoop
- a sorry sight
- too much of a good thing
- what’s done is done
Look Back at Act 1 Scene 1

**FIRST ENCOUNTER**

**LINES 1–55**
1. Who are Sampson and Gregory? Where are they? What are they doing?
2. What does Gregory say regarding ‘the quarrel’?
3. Who is Abraham? What does Sampson do to provoke him?

**LINES 56–101**
4. Who prevents Montague and Capulet from joining the brawl?
5. Whose arrival puts an end to the brawl? List the phrases he uses to describe the brawlers.
6. What punishment will be given to anyone who starts a street fight in the future?

**LINES 102–157**
7. How are Montague and Lady Montague related to A: Benvolio and B: Romeo? How are Benvolio and Romeo related?
8. Why is Lady Montague relieved?
9. When and where does Benvolio say he saw Romeo? What was Benvolio doing at the time?
10. How has Romeo been acting lately, according to Montague?
11. Has Montague made any attempt to find out what’s wrong with Romeo? Did he succeed?
12. What does Benvolio offer to do?

**LINES 158–236**
13. Why does time seem to drag for Romeo?
14. How does Romeo react to news of the ‘fray’? Is he excited, annoyed, sad, weary?
15. How does Romeo respond when Benvolio asks the name of the woman he loves? Do you think he wants to tell Benvolio about his troubles or would he prefer to be left alone?

**A CLOSER LOOK**

1. Sampson and Gregory are two important characters in this scene, yet they don’t appear in the play again. Why do you think Shakespeare chooses to begin the play with these two characters? What is he telling us about the Capulets and Montagues, about the world of the play?

2. ‘Clubs, bills, and partisans! Strike, beat them down,/ Down with the Capulets, down with the Montagues!’ (60-1) Imagine you are a citizen of Verona. Write a short diary entry describing the day of the brawl.

3. Imagine you are directing a stage production of *Romeo and Juliet*. How would you present the Montagues and Capulets in this opening scene? Do they look different from each other or similar? Think about how you would cast the two gangs, what costumes they would wear, what kind of accents they should have etc.

**THINK ABOUT THEMES**

**LOVE**
*Romeo and Juliet* has the reputation of being one of the greatest love stories of all time. Does it surprise you that when we first encounter Romeo, he is in love with someone else? For what reason might Shakespeare have made this storytelling decision?
Character Development

ROMEO

STATUS UPDATE
Romeo is a teenager of about sixteen or seventeen, and the only son of Montague and Lady Montague. He is not involved in the brawl in the opening scene as he is off by himself, pining over an unattainable girl.

CONSIDER THIS
- Romeo doesn't appear until line 147. What do we learn about him from Benvolio, Montague and Lady Montague before we meet Romeo himself?
- List three quotes from Romeo that indicate his distress over his love life.
- Take a Side: ‘Ay me, sad hours seem long.’ (148) Do you have sympathy for Romeo's romantic troubles or do you feel he is being a bit dramatic?
- According to Romeo, the woman he loves will 'not be hit/ With Cupid's arrow.' (195-6) What does he mean by this? Do you think he has ever approached her or is it more like a celebrity crush, with him admiring her from afar? Do you think she knows he exists?

BENVOLIO

STATUS UPDATE
Benvolio is Romeo's cousin. In this scene, he functions like an introductory guide for the audience, as he is the only character present during all the major events: the brawl, the conversation with the Montagues, and Romeo's introduction. Benvolio is one of the few characters who can move easily between the generations. He is trusted by the play's grown-ups and is friends with many of the younger characters.

CONSIDER THIS
- What is Benvolio's first action in the play? What can we say about his character based on this?
- Briefly summarise Benvolio's romantic advice for Romeo. Does Romeo respond positively or negatively?
- What kind of relationship do you think Romeo and Benvolio have?

TYBALT

STATUS UPDATE
Tybalt is Capulet's nephew and Juliet's cousin. He's a stylish swordsman and will take any excuse for a fight.

CONSIDER THIS
- Benvolio and Tybalt come across servants from both houses brawling in the street, but they both respond very differently. How do they each react?
- In what ways could Tybalt be said to be the polar opposite of Benvolio? Why do you think Shakespeare might have created these two 'opposite' characters?
- Do you think Tybalt is a victim or a willing participant in the Montague/Capulet feud? Give reasons for your answer.

THE PRINCE

STATUS UPDATE
The Prince of Verona is the ultimate authority figure in the play. He's a keeper of the peace, but also judge, jury and executioner. He serves an important function in this scene by giving the audience a bit of backstory on the Montague/Capulet feud.

CONSIDER THIS
- The Prince says that the feud between the Montagues and Capulets is 'bred of an airy word'. (76) What do you think he means by this? How long do you think the feud has been going on? Come up with three possible reasons for the feud.
- The Prince is a public figure, but how do you imagine he feels about the feud privately? Do you think he takes sides? Are there any clues in the text as to how he feels?
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