PRESENTS:

POEMS OF YEATS

W.B. Yeats is widely regarded as one of the ***20th century's greatest poets.*** Born into an elite Anglo-Protestant family, Yeats always considered himself first and foremost an Irishman. His early poems and plays ***drew heavily on Irish mythology,*** and while his later works evolved, they never abandoned their Irish roots. Yeats was a contemporary of many ***Modernist writers.*** While he did not consider himself a Modernist, his poetry often contained Modernist themes, such as ***disillusion with the contemporary world and a desire to transcend it through art.***

By analyzing questions, you can see patterns emerge, patterns that will help you answer questions. Qwiz5 is all about those patterns. In our (Qwiz5)^2 guides, we present you with the most important information from a group -- the most important German composers, the most important political treaties, etc. -- and break down the key facts to help you keep them straight.

The Second Coming

The Eminently Quotable Yeats: Yeats' poems have a plethora of arresting images, any one of which sticks with the reader long after completing the work. However, some lines have lived longer than others. In the case of the 1919 poem ***The Second Coming,*** the final lines are unforgettable: "***And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"*** American journalist and author ***Joan Didion*** famously titled a collection of her essays ***Slouching Towards Bethlehem.***

Modern Disillusion: *The Second Coming* offers a picture of society commensurate with its apocalyptic name. The poem's speaker laments the fact that: "***The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."*** The poem depicts a world where everything is collapsing: "***the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / the ceremony of innocence is drowned."***

From Out of the Natural World: Like much of Yeats' poems, *The Second Coming* borrows images from the natural world. Yeats' specific imagery in this poem ***evokes a sense of desolation.*** Yeats' speaker references "***the sands of the desert"*** and "***shadows of indignant desert birds"*** who reel all about the apocalyptic figure at the poem's center.

From Out of the Human World: In addition to the natural world, Yeats finds allusions to other works of art and historical moments. *The Second Coming* takes the biblical narrative of Christ's return to Earth and turns it into something far more sinister***.*** Instead of Christ, we are due for an ***antichrist.*** Yeats describes this rough beast as "***a shape with lion body and the head of a man***," evoking the image of the ancient Sphinx.

Buzz On: ***"A vast image out of Spiritus Mundi,"*** Yeats' speaker prefaces his vision of the sphinx-like creature with these words.

Sailing to Byzantium

The Eminently Quotable Yeats: Instead of ending with its most quotable line, *Sailing to Byzantium* begins with it. The speaker of the poem refers to his homeland, which he leaves, as "***No country for old men."*** American writer ***Cormac McCarthy*** used this line to title a book about violence and chaos on the US border with Mexico.

Modern Disillusion: The speaker of *Sailing to Byzantium* is disillusioned with his own life and seeks some way to attain immortality. He describes himself as "***but a paltry thing / A tattered coat upon a stick."*** He begs the learned sages of Byzantium to "***gather me / Into the artifice of eternity."***

From Out of the Natural World: The poem's speaker takes a somewhat dim view of the natural world. In the poem's first stanza he speaks dismissively of "***the young in one another's arms, birds in trees."*** Although his country is teeming with life—full of "***salmon-falls***" and "***mackerel-crowded seas"***—it is all for naught. ***Whatever is begotten,*** the speaker informs us, is ***born, and dies.*** This drives the speaker to his subsequent flight and search for immortality.

From Out of the Human World: While the mythical descriptions of Byzantium from Yeats' speaker are beautiful, Byzantium was a real place. The object of "***hammered gold and gold enamelling"*** that the speaker wishes to become is said to ***"keep a drowsy Emperor awake."*** Although the Emperor may not refer to a specific terrestrial ruler, Yeats' intent is to evoke the glory and beauty of the Byzantine Court. This is reinforced with the apt usage of a simile in which Yeats compares "***God's holy fire"*** to the "***gold mosaic of a wall."***

Buzz On: "***Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing,"*** Early in the poem Yeats' speaker emphasizes that the soul will long outlast its paltry frame; ***"Be the singing-masters of my soul,"*** Yeats' speaker's plea to the sages of Byzantium.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

The Eminently Quotable Yeats: Yeats' poetry is renowned for its sonorous, musical quality. The pastoral *Lake Isle of Innisfree* provides ample examples of Yeats' musicality. The poem's speaker idealizes the titular island, and memorably states his desire to live on it, ***"in the bee-loud glade.***"

Modern Disillusion: The speaker of *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* wishes to withdraw into rural isolation. This isolation fulfills a deep need for the speaker, who states in the poem's second quatrain: "***I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow."***

From Out of the Natural World: Yeats' speaker describes the isolated island as a kind of paradise. "***There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,"*** the speaker tells us, "***And evening full of linnet's wings."*** In this Edenic setting the speaker plans to build a small cabin of "***clay and wattles."***

From Out of the Human World: Like Byzantium, the Lake Isle of Innisfree is a real place. The island is situated in the freshwater ***Lough Gill,*** in County Sligo in Ireland. As a child ***Yeats spent summers on the island,*** and the memory of it was awoken suddenly in 1888.

Buzz On: "***I hear it in the deep heart's core,"*** the poem closes with the speaker relating how he can always hear the water lapping on the beach at Innisfree, even while he stands ***"on the roadway, or on the pavements gray."***

The Wild Swans at Coole

The Eminently Quotable Yeats: Yeats penned many memorable lines about the passage of time and the loss of youthful passion that goes with it. *The Wild Swans at Coole* contains one of his best ones. Reflecting upon the titular swans, the poem's speaker wistfully states: "***Their hearts have not grown old; / Passion or conquest, wander where they will, / Attend upon them still."***

Modern Disillusion: In *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Yeats' speaker is overcome with world-weariness. Noting the swans again, he states, "***I have looked upon these brilliant creatures, / And now my heart is sore."*** He reflects on his youth, ***nineteen years ago,*** when he first saw the swans, saying: "***All's changed."***

From Out of the Natural World: This poem is rife with images of nature. The poem's speaker contrasts his mortality with the seemingly ageless beauty of the swans. The swans inhabit a preternaturally calm lake: "***Under the October twilight the water / Mirrors a still sky."*** Their movements have a graceful musicality; Yeats' speaker references their "***clamorous wings"*** and later speaks of hearing the "***the bell-beat"*** of their wings in flight.

From Out of the Human World: Yeats wrote this melancholic poem while lodging with ***Lady Gregory*** at her estate in ***Coole Park.*** Yeats had suffered several personal tragedies in his life around this time, including the death of his friend, ***Lady Gregory's son Robert***.

Buzz On: "***They paddle in the cold / Companionable streams or climb the air,"*** a further beautiful description of the swans.

Easter, 1916

The Eminently Quotable Yeats: *Easter,1916* is perhaps Yeats' most famous poem. A poetic recounting of the unsuccessful ***Irish uprising in Easter of 1916,*** the poem is remembered for the refrain that closes three of its four stanzas: "***A terrible beauty is born."***

Modern Disillusion: Despite initial promise, the uprising failed and many of its ringleaders were executed. Yeats' feelings towards these rebels are complicated. Would England have honored its promise of home rule for Ireland, making the Rising unnecessary? In the poem's final stanza, Yeats asks: "***Was it needless death after all? / For England may keep faith / For all that is done and said."***

From Out of the Natural World: In the third stanza Yeats uses images taken from the natural world to illustrate the single-mindedness of the rebels. "***Hearts with one purpose alone / "*** he writes, "***Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream."*** Everything in the natural world—horses, riders, moor-hens—"***minute by minute they change"*** and yet the revolutionaries remain so focused on their mission they seem to be apart from the natural world.

From Out of the Human World: In the poem's final stanza Yeats acknowledges that, even if the rebels' sacrifice was meaningless, it is still the duty of the survivors "***to murmur name upon name."*** He recites those names: ***"MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connoly and Pearse."*** Even though he mocked these characters earlier, exchanging only ***"polite, meaningless words"*** with them, Yeats acknowledges that in their actions they "***are changed, changed utterly."***

Buzz On: "***Coming with vivid faces,"*** Yeats' description of the rebels he encountered before the Rising; "***Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart,"*** Yeats' further reflection on the dogged persistence of the rebels.
