Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



# Youth and Age

*by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Grades 8–11 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.2, RL.8.5

Coleridge wrote "Youth and Age" late in life, when he looked back on the energy of his younger years. The live poem is 49 lines in six verse paragraphs of short, mostly rhymed lines. It sets up a refrain-like pattern: a short paragraph ending "When I was young!" is followed by one beginning "When I was young?", and the same happens with "Ere I was old." The last paragraph repeats "That only serves to make us grieve" as the first line of the final six lines. Notice how the speaker moves between memory, argument, and pretending, and how he personifies Youth as a companion.

## THE POEM

Verse, a breeze mid blossoms straying,
Where Hope clung feeding, like a bee--
Both were mine! Life went a-maying
With Nature, Hope, and Poesy,
When I was young!

When I was young?--Ah, woful When!
Ah! for the change 'twixt Now and Then!
This breathing house not built with hands,
This body that does me grievous wrong,
O'er aery cliffs and glittering sands,
How lightly then it flashed along:--
Like those trim skiffs, unknown of yore,
On winding lakes and rivers wide,
That ask no aid of sail or oar,
That fear no spite of wind or tide!
Nought cared this body for wind or weather
When Youth and I lived in't together.

Flowers are lovely; Love is flower-like;
Friendship is a sheltering tree;
O! the joys, that came down shower-like.
Of Friendship, Love, and Liberty,
Ere I was old!

Ere I was old? Ah woful Ere,
Which tells me, Youth's no longer here!
O Youth! for years so many and sweet,
'Tis known, that Thou and I were one,
I'll think it but a fond conceit--
It cannot be that Thou art gone!
Thy vesper-bell hath not yet toll'd:--
And thou wert aye a masker bold!
What strange disguise hast now put on,
To make believe, that thou art gone?
I see these locks in silvery slips,
This drooping gait, this altered size:
But Spring-tide blossoms on thy lips.
And tears take sunshine from thine eyes!
Life is but thought: so think I will
That Youth and I are house-mates still.

Dew-drops are the gems of morning,
But the tears of mournful eve!
Where no hope is, life's a warning
That only serves to make us grieve,
When we are old:

That only serves to make us grieve
With oft and tedious taking-leave,
Like some poor nigh-related guest,
That may not rudely be dismist;
Yet hath outstay'd his welcome while,
And tells the jest without the smile.

## VOCABULARY

**a-maying** — going out to gather flowers on May Day, a symbol of youthful play

**woful** — full of woe (an older spelling of "woeful")

**aery** — of the air; lofty and light

**skiffs** — small light boats

**yore** — long ago

**vesper-bell** — an evening bell, here suggesting the end of a day or life

**aye** — always

**masker** — a person in disguise at a masquerade

**conceit** — a fanciful idea

**nigh-related** — closely related

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first verse paragraph describes life when "Life went a-maying / With Nature, Hope, and Poesy." What do "Nature, Hope, and Poesy" seem to stand for, and how does the "bee" image help you see them?

2. In the second verse paragraph the speaker calls his body a "breathing house not built with hands" and says "How lightly then it flashed along." How does he compare his body then and now, and what do the "trim skiffs" that "ask no aid of sail or oar" add to the picture?

3. The poem keeps correcting its own phrases: "When I was young?" and "Ere I was old? Ah woful Ere." What does the speaker realize each time he repeats the phrase as a question?

4. In the long fourth verse paragraph the speaker tries to talk himself out of believing Youth is gone: "It cannot be that Thou art gone!" What evidence does he give that Youth is still there, and what evidence does he admit to the contrary?

5. The poem ends with a "poor nigh-related guest" who "tells the jest without the smile." What does this simile say about how the speaker thinks of old age and grief, and how does it differ from the playful tone of the opening?

## WRITING PROMPT

Write a short poem or paragraph in which you talk directly to a stage of your own life (childhood, a favorite summer, a hobby you left behind) as if it were a person who has moved away. Like Coleridge, include one memory of how it felt and one sign that it is not entirely gone.

# Youth and Age — Answer Key

1. “Verse, a breeze mid blossoms straying, / Where Hope clung feeding, like a bee--“ are the good things of youth: Nature, Hope, and poetry. The bee image shows Hope gathering sweetness from “blossoms” the way a young person gathers joy from life. “Both were mine! Life went a-maying / With Nature, Hope, and Poesy, / When I was young!”

2. He calls his body “This breathing house not built with hands,” “This body that does me grievous wrong,” but then “O’er aery cliffs and glittering sands, / How lightly then it flashed along.” The “trim skiffs, unknown of yore,” that “ask no aid of sail or oar, / That fear no spite of wind or tide!” show effortless motion. As a young man he “Nought cared … for wind or weather / When Youth and I lived in’t together.”

3. Turning the phrase into a question shows him realizing the loss: “Ah, woful When! / Ah! for the change” between Now and Then, and “Ah woful Ere, / Which tells me, Youth’s no longer here!” Each time the repeated phrase turns from a happy memory into a painful reminder that the time is over.

4. He says “’Tis known, that Thou and I were one,” “I’ll think it but a fond conceit,” and “thou wert aye a masker bold!” so Youth may be only in “strange disguise” to “make believe, that thou art gone.” For Youth he points to “Spring-tide blossoms on thy lips” and “tears take sunshine from thine eyes.” Against it he admits “I see these locks in silvery slips, / This drooping gait, this altered size.” He settles on “Life is but thought: so think I will / That Youth and I are house-mates still.”

5. The simile compares unwanted grief to a visitor who “may not rudely be dismist” but “hath outstay’d his welcome while.” “With oft and tedious taking-leave” shows lingering sorrow. The tone is much more sober and tired than the opening: the earlier lines were bright and breezy, and the ending is polite, weary, and joyless: “tells the jest without the smile.”

*Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/youth-and-age-samuel-taylor-coleridge/*