

English 10

Mr. Rooney (Rm. 227)

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Elements of Literature Fourth Course

Objective: We will analyze and discuss the short story “By the Waters of Babylon” by deconstructing the writer’s style and intent, and by reading excerpts from novels that explore similar themes.

1. The Do Now

- a. Stephen Vincent Benet’s Writing Style
- b. Appreciating Language and Its Purpose

2. Word(s) of the Day

- a. Genre
- b. Point of View

3. Round-Table Discussion

- a. Length of the Story
- b. Simplicity of the Writing
- c. Mystery of the Story
- d. Believing in Something Greater than Yourself

4. Excerpts from *The Road*, *Harry Potter & the Sorcerer’s Stone*, & *the Zombie Survival Guide*

- a. The Genre of Science Fiction & Fantasy
- b. The Influence of Books
- c. Man vs. Man/ Man vs. Nature/ Man vs. Self

5. Writing Exercise

- a. Elements of a Genre

6. Homework

- a. Review Documents Page over the Weekend
- b. Reread “By the Waters of Babylon”
- c. Make sure all Do Now’s and Writing Exercises are complete

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

The Do Now

Directions:

Please consider the writer’s style as we read the following passage:

“I went fasting, as is the law. My body hurt but not my heart. When the dawn came, I was out of sight of the village. I prayed and purified myself, waiting for a sign. The sign was an eagle. It flew east.”

The story is written in a very simple, spare style. Many of the sentences are simple sentences. How does this style complement the depiction of the character?

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Bene

Word(s) of the Day

a. Genre

- A literary genre is a category meant to describe a type of story based on:

1. writing style and technique
3. tone and mood
4. length and presentation
5. content and material

- Examples of Various Genres:

- | | |
|------------|--------------|
| a. Fantasy | d. Memoir |
| b. Horror | e. Biography |
| c. Poetry | f. Mythology |

b. Point of View (pg. 1003)

- A point of view is the perspective, or opinion, of one or more characters. It is the vantage point from which a writer tells a story. There are three main points of view.

- Omniscient (or “all-knowing”) point of view

- a. Narrator is not part of the story
- b. Can tell what all characters are thinking, feeling, saying, and doing

- Third-Person Limited Point of View

- a. Narrator is not part of the story
- b. Zooms in on thoughts and feelings of one character

- First-Person Point of View

- a. A character in the story
- b. We hear and see only what the narrator hears and sees

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Round-Table Discussion

Group 1: (Pg. 265 - 266)

The north and the west and the south are good hunting ground, but it is forbidden to go east. It is forbidden to go to any of the Dead Places except to search for metal and then he who touches the metal must be a priest or the son of a priest. Afterwards, both the man and the metal must be purified. These are the rules and the laws; they are well made. It is forbidden to cross the great river and look upon the place that was the Place of the Gods—this is most strictly forbidden. We do not even say its name though we know its name. It is there that spirits live, and demons—it is there that there are the ashes of the Great Burning. These things are forbidden—they have been forbidden since the beginning of time.

My father is a priest; I am the son of a priest. I have been in the Dead Places near us, with my father—at first, I was afraid. When my father went into the house to search for the metal, I stood by the door and my heart felt small and weak. It was a dead man's house, a spirit house. It did not have the smell of man, though there were old bones in a corner. But it is not fitting that a priest's son should show fear. I looked at the bones in the shadow and kept my voice still. Then my father came out with the metal—good, strong piece. He looked at me with both eyes but I had not run away. He gave me the metal to hold—I took it and did not die. So he knew that I was truly his son and would be a priest in my time. That was when I was very young—nevertheless, my brothers would not have done it, though they are good hunters. After that, they gave me the good piece of meat and the warm corner of the fire. My father watched over me—he was glad that I should be a priest. But when I boasted or wept without a reason, he punished me more strictly than my brothers. That was right.

After a time, I myself was allowed to go into the dead houses and search for metal. So I learned the ways of those houses—and if I saw bones, I was no longer afraid. The bones are light and old—sometimes they will fall into dust if you touch them. But that is a great sin.

I was taught the chants and the spells—I was taught how to stop the running of blood from a wound and many secrets. A priest must know many secrets—that was what my father said.

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Round-Table Discussion

Group 2: (Pg. 267)

Toward the setting of the eighth sun, I came to the banks of the great river. It was half-a-day's journey after I had left the god-road—we do not use the god-roads now for they are falling apart into great blocks of stone, and the forest is safer going. A long way off, I had seen the water through trees but the trees were thick. At last, I came out upon an open place at the top of a cliff. There was the great river below, like a giant in the sun. It is very long, very wide. It could eat all the streams we know and still be thirsty. Its name is Ou-dis-sun, the Sacred, the Long. No man of my tribe had seen it, not even my father, the priest. It was magic and I prayed.

Then I raised my eyes and looked south. It was there, the Place of the Gods.

How can I tell what it was like—you do not know. It was there, in the red light, and they were too big to be houses. It was there with the red light upon it, mighty and ruined. I knew that in another moment the gods would see me. I covered my eyes with my hands and crept back into the forest.

Surely, that was enough to do, and live. Surely it was enough to spend the night upon the cliff. The Forest People themselves do not come near. Yet, all through the night, I knew that I should have to cross the river and walk in the places of the gods, although the gods ate me up. My magic did not help me at all and yet there was a fire in my bowels, a fire in my mind. When the sun rose, I thought, "My journey has been clean. Now I will go home from my journey." But, even as

I thought so, I knew I could not. If I went to the Place of the Gods, I would surely die, but, if I did not go, I could never be at peace with my spirit again. It is better to lose one's life than one's spirit, if one is a priest and the son of a priest.

Nevertheless, as I made the raft, the tears ran out of my eyes. The Forest People could have killed me without fight, if they had come upon me then, but they did not come.

When the raft was made, I said the sayings for the dead and painted myself for death. My heart was cold as a frog and my knees like water, but the burning in my mind would not let me have peace.

As I pushed the raft from the shore, I began my death song—I had the right. It was a fine song.

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Round-Table Discussion

Group 3: (Pg. 268 - 269)

How shall I tell what I saw? I went carefully, my strung bow in my hand, my skin ready for danger. There should have been the wailings of spirits and the shrieks of demons, but there were not. It was very silent and sunny where I had landed—the wind and the rain and the birds that drop seeds had done their work—the grass grew in the cracks of the broken stone. It is a fair island—no wonder the gods built there. If I had come there, a god, I also would have built.

How shall I tell what I saw? The towers are not all broken—here and there one still stands, like a great tree in a forest, and the birds nest high. But the towers themselves look blind, for the gods are gone. I saw a fishhawk, catching fish in the river. I saw a little dance of white butterflies over a great heap of broken stones and columns. I went there and looked about me—there was a carved stone with cut—letters, broken in half. I can read letters but I could not understand these. They said UBTREAS. There was also the shattered image of a man or a god. It had been made of white stone and he wore his hair tied back like a woman's. His name was ASHING, as I read on the cracked half of a stone. I thought it wise to pray to ASHING, though I do not know that god.

How shall I tell what I saw? There was no smell of man left, on stone or metal. Nor were there many trees in that wilderness of stone. There are many pigeons, nesting and dropping in the towers—the gods must have loved them, or, perhaps, they used them for sacrifices. There are wild cats that roam the god-roads, green-eyed, unafraid of man. At night they wail like demons but they are not demons. The wild dogs are more dangerous, for they hunt in a pack, but them I did not meet till later. Everywhere there are the carved stones, carved with magical numbers or words.

I went north—I did not try to hide myself. When a god or a demon saw me, then I would die, but meanwhile I was no longer afraid. My hunger for knowledge burned in me—there was so much that I could not understand. After a while, I knew that my belly was hungry. I could have hunted for my meat, but I did not hunt. It is known that the gods did not hunt as we do—they got their food from enchanted boxes and jars. Sometimes these are still found in the Dead Places—once, when I was a child and foolish, I opened such a jar and tasted it and found the food sweet. But my father found out and punished me for it strictly, for, often, that food is death. Now, though, I had long gone past what was forbidden, and I entered the likeliest towers, looking for the food of the gods.

I found it at last in the ruins of a great temple in the mid-city. A mighty temple it must have been, for the roof was painted like the sky at night with its stars—that much I could see, though the colors were faint and dim. It went down into great caves and tunnels—perhaps they kept their slaves there. But when I started to climb down, I heard the squeaking of rats, so I did not go—rats are unclean, and there must have been many tribes of them, from the squeaking. But near there, I found food, in the heart of a ruin, behind a door that still opened. I ate only the fruits from the jars—they had a very sweet taste. There was drink, too, in bottles of glass—the drink of the gods was strong and made my head swim. After I had eaten and drunk, I slept on the top of a stone, my bow at my side.

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Round-Table Discussion

Group 4: (Pg. 271 - 272)

Then I saw the dead god. He was sitting in his chair, by the window, in a room I had not entered before and, for the first moment, I thought that he was alive. Then I saw the skin on the back of his hand—it was like dry leather. The room was shut, hot and dry—no doubt that had kept him as he was. At first I was afraid to approach him—then the fear left me. He was sitting looking out over the city—he was dressed in the clothes of the gods. His age was neither young nor old—I could not tell his age. But there was wisdom in his face and great sadness. You could see that he would have not run away. He had sat at his window, watching his city die—then he himself had died. But it is better to lose one's life than one's spirit—and you could see from the face that his spirit had not been lost. I knew, that, if I touched him, he would fall into dust—and yet, there was something unconquered in the face.

That is all of my story, for then I knew he was a man—I knew then that they had been men, neither gods nor demons. It is a great knowledge, hard to tell and believe. They were men—they went a dark road, but they were men. I had no fear after that—I had no fear going home, though twice I fought off the dogs and once I was hunted for two days by the Forest People. When I saw my father again, I prayed and was purified. He touched my lips and my breast, he said, "You went away a boy. You come back a man and a priest." I said, "Father, they were men! I have been in the Place of the Gods and seen it! Now slay me, if it is the law—but still I know they were men."

He looked at me out of both eyes. He said, "The law is not always the same shape—you have done what you have done. I could not have done it my time, but you come after me. Tell!"

I told and he listened. After that, I wished to tell all the people but he showed me otherwise. He said, "Truth is a hard deer to hunt. If you eat too much truth at once, you may die of the truth. It was not idly that our fathers forbade the Dead Places." He was right—it is better the truth should come little by little. I have learned that, being a priest. Perhaps, in the old days, they ate knowledge too fast.

Nevertheless, we make a beginning. it is not for the metal alone we go to the Dead Places now—there are the books and the writings. They are hard to learn. And the magic tools are broken—but we can look at them and wonder. At least, we make a beginning. And, when I am chief priest we shall go beyond the great river. We shall go to the Place of the Gods—the place newyork—not one man but a company. We shall look for the images of the gods and find the god ASHING and the others—the gods Lincoln and Biltmore and Moses. But they were men who built the city, not gods or demons. They were men. I remember the dead man's face. They were men who were here before us. We must build again.

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Excerpts from Other Stories Exploring the Genre of Science Fiction & Fantasy

***The Road* by Cormac McCarthy**

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath. He pushed away the plastic tarpaulin and raised himself in the stinking robes and blankets and looked toward the east for any light but there was none. In the dream from which he'd wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls. Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark.

With the first gray light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years. They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here.

When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Excerpts from Other Stories Exploring the Genre of Science Fiction & Fantasy

***Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* by J.K. Rowling**

"Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy. Still, first-year Gryffindors only had Potions with the Slytherins, so they didn't have to put up with Malfoy much. Or at least, they didn't until they spotted a notice pinned up in the Gryffindor common room that made them all groan. Flying lessons would be starting on Thursday- and Gryffindor and Slytherin would be learning together.

"Typical," said Harry darkly. "Just what I always wanted. To make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy."

He had been looking forward to learning to fly more than anything else.

"You don't know that you'll make a fool of yourself," said Ron reasonably. "Anyway, I know Malfoy's always going on about how good he is at Quidditch, but I bet that's all talk."

Malfoy certainly did talk about flying a lot. He complained loudly about first years never getting on the house Quidditch teams and told long, boastful stories that always seemed to end with him narrowly escaping Muggles in helicopters. He wasn't the only one, though: the way Seamus Finnigan told it, he'd spent most of his childhood zooming around the countryside on his broomstick. Even Ron would tell anyone who'd listen about the time he'd almost hit a hang glider on Charile's old broom. Everyone from wizarding families talked about Quidditch constantly. Ron had already had a big argument with Dean Thomas, who shared their dormitory, about soccer. Ron couldn't see what was exciting about a game with only one ball where no one was allowed to fly. Harry had caught Ron prodding Dean's poster of West Ham soccer team, trying to make the players move.

Neville had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. Privately, Harry felt she'd had good reason, because Neville managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground.

Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book- not that she hadn't tried. At breakfast on Thursday she bored them all stupid with flying tips she'd gotten out of a library book called *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Neville has hanging on to her every word, desperate for anything that might help him hang on to his broomstick later, but everybody else was very pleased when Hermione's lecture was interrupted by the arrival of the mail.

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Writing Exercise

In your journals, please describe the key elements that make up a science fiction and/ or fantasy story. In other words, what defines this particular genre? Please use examples and textual evidence from “By the Waters of Babylon” and the excerpts to support your description and definition.

While writing, please use complete sentences only. If you have the time, please indicate any being verbs by circling them.

English 10

Mr. Rooney

“By the Waters of Babylon” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Homework

First, take a breather. First full week is in the books. Class has been going well. Thank you. Have an enjoyable and safe weekend. Next week, we will begin work on our first essay. As preparation, please complete the following:

- a. Review Documents Page
 - Literary terms
 - Topics of Discussion
 - Excerpts from outside sources
- b. Reread “By the Waters of Babylon”
 - Review notes
 - Prepare to write an essay about one of the story’s themes
- c. Make sure all Do Now’s and Writing Exercises are complete