

Name: _____ Class: _____

Morning in the Burned House

By Margaret Atwood
From Morning In The Burned House • 1995

Margaret Atwood (born 1939) is an award-winning Canadian poet, novelist and literary critic. While she is most famous for her novels, Atwood published fifteen books of poetry. In "Morning in the Burned House," the speaker paints a dream-like picture of her childhood. As you read, take notes on the poet's use of figurative language and symbolism.

[1] In the burned house I am eating breakfast.
You understand: there is no house, there is no
breakfast,
yet here I am.

The spoon which was melted scrapes against
the bowl which was melted also.
[5] No one else is around.

Where have they gone to, brother and sister,
mother and father? Off along the shore,
perhaps. Their clothes are still on the hangers,

[10] their dishes piled beside the sink,
which is beside the woodstove
with its grate and sooty kettle,

every detail clear,
tin cup and rippled mirror.

[15] The day is bright and songless,

the lake is blue, the forest watchful.
In the east a bank of cloud
rises up silently like dark bread.

I can see the swirls in the oilcloth,
[20] I can see the flaws in the glass,
those flares where the sun hits them.

I can't see my own arms and legs
or know if this is a trap or blessing,
finding myself back here, where everything

[25] in this house has long been over,
kettle and mirror, spoon and bowl,
including my own body,



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including the body I had then,
including the body I have now
[30] as I sit at this morning table, alone and happy,

bare child's feet on the scorched¹ floorboards
(I can almost see)
in my burning clothes, the thin green shorts

and grubby yellow T-shirt
[35] holding my cindery², non-existent,
radiant³ flesh. Incandescent.⁴

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1. **Scorched** (*adjective*): Mostly burned
 2. **Cindery** (*adjective*): Filled with firewood
 3. **Radiant** (*adjective*): Shining brightly
 4. **Incandescent** (*adjective*): emitting light as a result of being heated; passionate

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies a theme of the text? [RL.2]
- A. Pain
 - B. Aging
 - C. Nature
 - D. Happiness

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
- A. "No one else is around. / Where have they gone to, brother and sister, / mother and father?" (Lines 6-8)
 - B. "The day is bright and songless, / the lake is blue, the forest watchful. / In the east a bank of cloud / rises up silently like dark bread." (Lines 15-18)
 - C. "if this is a trap or blessing, / finding myself back here, where everything / in this house has long been over / kettle and mirror, spoon and bowl, / including my own body, / including the body I had then, / including the body I have now" (Lines 23-29)
 - D. "in my burning clothes, the thin green shorts / and grubby yellow T-shirt / holding my cindery, non-existent, / radiant flesh. Incandescent." (Lines 33-36)

3. How does the first stanza help frame the overall poem? Consider structure, theme, setting, etc. in your answer. [RL.5]

4. What effect does the figurative language in lines 17-18 contribute to the poem's mood? [RL.4]
- A. Comparing a cloud to rising bread, the speaker adds another element of domesticity to the poem, underlying her nostalgia.
 - B. Comparing a cloud to rising bread, the speaker emphasizes the stillness of the house in contrast to the growth and movement of nature.
 - C. The speaker describes the cloud as dark rising bread, suggesting an omen on the horizon.
 - D. The speaker describes the cloud as rising silently, implying an impending and unexpected tragedy.

5. Throughout the poem Atwood uses fire as a motif. What does this motif most likely represent in the poem? [RL.3]
- A. Atwood literally means fire; the speaker is revisiting a dream from her childhood in which her house burnt down.
 - B. Atwood uses fire to convey violence and trauma, which have destroyed the speaker's family/home life.
 - C. Fire is both an element of destruction and rebirth; it represents the passage of time, creating and destroying as it goes on.
 - D. Fire represents the speaker's grief over the loss of her childhood home and family, who likely perished in the fire (if not also the speaker herself).

