*Sample Literary Response*

“To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.”

 —From Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*

Pater’s advice is the response to a question: since we are alive only for a short while, what is the best way to spend the time we do have? His answer is that we should try to experience every single moment to the fullest, and not fall into habits that lead us to repeat the same experiences over and over. He uses an image to express this idea: the “hard, gem-like flame.” It is important to distinguish this from a “flame-like gem.” He is not talking about the light or color of a hard mineral, since this would be a metaphor for stability, not constant change. Gems are signs of social status and permanence, like the diamond you might give someone to identify the strength of your engagement. Instead, he insists on the flame: something that is moving, changing, and burning up its source at every moment. He calls it “hard” and “gem-like” to suggest its beauty and intensity. Interestingly, the way Pater orders the sentence makes it read like the movement of a flame, since the stress repeatedly rises (on “always,” “ecstasy,” and “success”) and then falls back with the next words.

*Notice a few things about this passage. First, the writer puts the passage into the larger context from which it is drawn, noting that it is the answer to a question Pater had posed in the last paragraph. This is essential in all literary responses: you should not assume that your reader has the book in front of them (even if I, of course, will). Second, the writer focuses on carefully explaining an image, but without simply assuming what it means based on common cultural knowledge (eg flames mean passion). In this case, what Pater says is very strange, and the writer tries to explain just what is strange about it. Finally, the writer takes a chance with a kind of wild observation about the sound of the sentence. There are two points to make about this: one, always read literary passages aloud, since you might notice something interesting about them; and two, be creative with your responses. You might not always hit the mark, and even your wildest stabs at meaning need to be aware of what the writer says (it “sounds” like a flame, which is relevant to the sentence, not like, say, like a fish out of water gasping for air).*

*Literary analysis always demands two things: description and explanation. Carefully describe what you read on the page (its context, the metaphors, the sound), and then explain carefully why you think the author wrote the way they did.*

*You can always say* something *about a literary passage, so the other option you have for philosophy responses—explain why you don’t understand—does not hold in the same way here.*