



# October – U2 – Notes (1)



- **Activity types:** discussion, rhyming words, phonetics, gap filling, text analysis and comparison
- **Level:** Pre-intermediate/Intermediate
- **Language:** Talking about autumn; Predicting; Making hypotheses; Comparing; Expressing feelings and opinions; Giving reasons; Describing historical events; Inferring; Focus on the sound /eə/
- **Note:** *October* is the title song of U2's second album *October*, released in 1981. It was also included as a hidden track on *The Best of 1980-1990* collection. The song, played on the piano by The Edge, is simple and powerful, and quite different from the typical sound of U2. The entire *October* album lays great emphasis on religion and spirituality.

**A) Warm-up.** Write the word OCTOBER on the board. Elicit which ideas or feelings students associate with this month and write them on the board.

**Possible answers:** autumn – brown leaves – rain – mushrooms – Hallowe'en – hibernation – sadness – melancholy. **Note:** answers will vary if you live in the southern, rather than the northern, hemisphere.

- A brief discussion about the main aspects of autumn can follow.
- Tell students that they are going to listen to the song *October* by the Irish rock band U2. Ask them to predict the content and the atmosphere of the song.

**B) Rhyming words.** Write the following words on the board:

**WEAR – FARE – HEIR – BEAR – FEAR – FAIR – BARE – HAIR – CARE**

Ask students which word doesn't rhyme with the others. **Key:** fear /iə/

**Note:** The words "bear"-"bare" and "fare"-"fair" are homophones.

**C) Phonetics.** Focus on the sound /eə/ and explain that it can be spelt in different ways:

- "are": dare, share, compare
- "air": air, pair, chair
- "ear": pear, tear (verb)
- "eir": heir, their
- "a": Mary, vary
- "ere": there, where

**D) Listening and gap filling.** Ask students to listen for 3 words in activity B), numbering them in the order they hear them. Play the song. Then students complete the song (exercise 1) according to their answers to the previous activity and context.

**Key: 1. bare 2. wear 3. care**

**E)** Play the song again. Students can check their answers in pairs. Correct in open class.

**Key (and complete text):**

October  
And the trees are stripped **bare**  
Of all they **wear**  
What do I **care**?

October  
And kingdoms rise  
And kingdoms fall  
But you go on and on



## October – U2 – Text Analysis - Notes (2)



- F) Text analysis of the song lyrics.** Ask students their impressions of the song and if their predictions were right. Then, point out that song lyrics can often be analysed as poetry. Here are some suggestions and background information on the song.
- In lines 1-3 the literal meaning is about the changes occurring in nature in October. The focus is on (*bare*) naked trees, (*stripped of*) deprived of leaves, fruit, flowers and maybe birds. Elicit other typical features of the autumn (e.g. it is often windy and rainy, it gets colder, it gets dark sooner, some birds migrate, some animals hibernate...). **Note:** Features may vary according to where you live.
  - The use of the verb *wear*, however, evokes a metaphorical meaning: trees can be compared to people (personification) and leaves to clothes and, ultimately, to life. When people are *stripped of* their youth, health and life, they get old, sick and die. These considerations suggest that in the first three lines the focus is on death. According to some interpretations, the songwriter Bono may be referring to his mother, who died when he was 14. (*Tomorrow*, another song on the album *October*, also alludes to the death of the singer's mother).
  - Line 4, *What do I care?*, seems to suggest that all the changes occurring in nature and human life do not affect the singer. Why? Ask students to make hypotheses. Indifference? Unconcern? Insensitivity? Coldness? Faith in eternal life? Faith in God?
  - At this point, ask students to express their impressions about the first 4 lines. They may say the song is sad, unhappy, melancholic, realistic, negative, pessimistic, etc.
  - In lines 6-7 the focus is on historical and political changes. Ask students to make some examples of kingdoms/empires which rose and fell in the past (e.g. the Roman Empire) and try to explain why they fell (e.g. invasion/conquest by other peoples). In a 1982 interview Bono also gave a historical and social interpretation of these lines, referring to the 1970's and 1980's as "colder times" compared to the political, social and economic expectations of the 1960's.
  - Line 8 reverses the seemingly pessimistic meaning of the song: *And you go on and on* suggests that, despite all the changes occurring in nature, human life and history, there is something that goes on eternally. Death is defeated by eternal life. Therefore, the reason why the singer "doesn't care" about changes and death is because there is something that never changes and never dies. Ask students who/what *You* may refer to. Life? God? (God is one of the main themes in the album *October*). Pointing out a new beginning after loss and death, the overall message of the song is optimistic, with its encouragement to move on and "rejoice". (Another song on the album *October* is called *Rejoice*.)
  - **Note on the language:** the predominance of monosyllabic words, the use of basic conjunctions (*and/but*), and the frequent repetition of *and* all contribute to evoke a primitive rhythm in the song.
  - The idea of life and death's cycle in *October* can also be connected to Hallowe'en, which is celebrated on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October. Hallowe'en has its origins in the ancient Celtic festival known as Samhain, which marked the end of the summer season. It celebrated the final harvest and the dead, but also opened a new beginning in life's cycle, since it was generally considered as the Celtic New Year. The ancient Celts believed that on 31<sup>st</sup> October the boundary between the living and the dead dissolved. In medieval Ireland, Samhain became the principal festival, celebrated with a great assembly at the royal court in Tara, lasting for three days. In modern Ireland and Scotland, the name by which Halloween is known in the Gaelic language is still *Oíche/Oidhche Shamhna*.
  - **Follow-up:** Students can search for more information about Samhain and Hallowe'en, report and compare their different findings.



### G) Comparing the song lyrics of U2's *October* to the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh's *October*.

- **Patrick Kavanagh** - As discussed in Tatania Pais Becher's book *L'Irlanda degli U2: musica, letteratura e radici culturali* (Arcana Editrice, 1998), some of U2's lyrics evoke poems by the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh. Kavanagh was born and raised in Inniskeen, County Monaghan, on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1904. The first son of ten children, he followed in his father's footsteps and learned the trades of both a shoemaker and a farmer. Although his formal education ended the age of twelve, he was able to pursue his own special interest in literature and writing poetry. His poems celebrate the scenery and land of his native Inniskeen. Other recurring themes are Irish rural life and religion. His use of language is highly creative, reflecting his powerful imagination. In 1936 his first book of verse, *Ploughman and Other Poems*, was published. After moving to Dublin in 1939, he worked as a journalist. His best-known poem *The Great Hunger* was published in 1942. After the war he published the novel *Tarry Flynn* (1948), about a farmer who dreams of a different life as a writer and a poet. In his later years, he was regarded by many critics as the most important Irish poet since Yeats. He died in 1967. His poem *On Raglan Road*, set to a traditional air composed by Thomas Connellan in the 17th century, has been performed by several artists, including Van Morrison, Dire Straits, Billy Bragg and Sinéad O'Connor.
- **Rhyme scheme:** The poem *October* is a Shakespearean sonnet, with 3 quatrains followed by a rhyming couplet. The rhyme scheme is abab, cdcd, efef, gg, although some are near rhymes.
- **Summary of the poem:** Autumn yellow leaves (l.1) remind the poet of time going by and of *youth passing* and this breaks his heart (l. 6-7). Although he is still young, he says, *my nineteen years weigh heavily on my feet* (l.14). At the same time, however, he realizes that there is something that never changes (*The breeze too, even the temperature And pattern of movement is precisely the same*, l. 5-6): *Now I am sure of something. Something will be mine wherever I am* (l. 7-8). This certainty stops the poet from worrying about the future: *I want to throw myself on the public street without caring For anything but the praying that the earth offers* (l. 9-10). Line 13, *A man is ploughing ground for winter wheat*, suggests the idea of hope for a new life's cycle, a new beginning, and ultimately, the idea of *Eternity* (l.3).
- **Comparing the song lyrics and the poem:** Elicit all the themes (time passing, changes, eternity), atmospheres (melancholy vs optimism), images (leaves fall) and words (*caring/care*) that the two texts have in common. Elicit any differences (in Kavanagh the focus is on youth passing, in U2 on death).
- **Follow-up:**
  - Students can search for more details about Patrick Kavanagh's life and works.
  - Ask students to compare the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh to other poets as regards life events, themes and style. They can refer to poets who wrote in their native language or any other foreign languages they know. For Italian students the poet Giacomo Leopardi offers several terms of comparison. See also John Keat's "Ode to Autumn".

This worksheet is dedicated to the memory of Nollaig Ó Caomhánaigh (1937-2003) and Thomas Healy (1922-2002).



# October



## U2

October  
And the trees are stripped \_\_\_\_\_  
Of all they \_\_\_\_\_  
What do I \_\_\_\_\_ ?

October  
And kingdoms rise  
And kingdoms fall  
But you go on  
And on



## Patrick Kavanagh

(1904 - 1967)

O leafy yellowness you create for me  
A world that was and now is poised above time,  
I do not need to puzzle out Eternity  
As I walk this arboreal street on the edge of a town.

The breeze too, even the temperature  
And pattern of movement is precisely the same  
As broke my heart for youth passing. Now I am sure  
Of something. Something will be mine wherever I am.

I want to throw myself on the public street without caring  
For anything but the praying that the earth offers.  
It is October over all my life and the light is staring  
As it caught me once in a plantation by the fox coverts.

A man is ploughing ground for winter wheat  
And my nineteen years weigh heavily on my feet.

