

Painting as a Pastime¹

By Winston S. Churchill (An Excerpt)
AP English Language Lesson by Eileen Bach

British statesman Winston Churchill first achieved fame as a soldier in the Boer War, later serving in the trenches of WWI. Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty and led his nation as prime minister during WWII. In this passage, he compares painting to fighting a battle. The passage below is from his essay "Painting as a Pastime" in the book Thoughts and Adventures. Read this excerpt carefully and answer the questions below. Line numbers are in brackets.

[1] Just to paint is great fun. The colours are lovely to look at and delicious to squeeze out. Matching them, however crudely, with what you see is fascinating and absolutely absorbing. Try it if you have not done so – before you die. As one slowly begins to escape from the difficulties of choosing the right colours and laying them on in the right places and in the right way, wider considerations come into view. One begins to see, for instance, [10] that painting is like fighting a battle; and trying to paint a picture is, I suppose, like trying to fight a battle. It is, if anything, more exciting than fighting it successfully. But the principle is the same. It is the same kind of problem, as unfolding a long, sustained, interlocked argument. It is a proposition which, whether of few or numberless parts, is commanded by a single unity of conception. And we think though we cannot tell – that painting a great picture must require an [20] intellect on the grand scale. There must be that all-embracing view which presents the beginning and the end, the whole and each part, a one instantaneous impression retentively and untiringly held in the mind. When we look at the larger Turners* – canvases yards wide and tall – and observe that they are all done in one piece and represent one single second of time, and that every innumerable detail, however small, however distant, however subordinate, is set forth [30] naturally and in its true proportion and relation, without effort, without failure, we must feel in the presence of an intellectual manifestation the equal in quality and intensity of the finest achievements of warlike action, of forensic argument, or of scientific or philosophical adjudication.

In all battles two things are usually required of the Commander-in-Chief: to make a good plan for his army and, secondly, to keep a strong reserve.

[40] Both of these are also obligatory upon the painter. To make a plan, thorough reconnaissance of the country where the battle is to be fought is needed. Its fields, its mountains, its rivers, its bridges, its trees, its flowers, its atmosphere – all require and repay attentive observation from a special point of view. One is quite astonished to find how many things there are in the landscape, and in every object it in, one never noticed before.

And this is a tremendous new pleasure and [50] interest which invests every walk or drive with an added object. So many colours on the hillside, each different in shadow and in sunlight; such brilliant reflections in the pool, each a key lower than what they repeat; such lovely lights gilding or silvering surface or outline, all tinted exquisitely with pale colour, rose, orange, green or violet. I found myself instinctively as I walked noting the tint and character of a leaf, the dreamy purple shades of mountains, the exquisite [60] lacery of winter branches, the dim pale silhouettes of far horizons. And I had lived for over 40 years without ever noticing any of them except in a general way, as one might look at a crowd and say, "What a lot of people!"

I think this heightened sense of observation of Nature is one of the chief delights that have come to me through trying to paint.

**Paintings by the preeminent English artist J. M. Turner (1775-1851), whose best-known works are probably The Fighting Temeraire (1838), Slave Ship (1840), and Rain, Steam and Speed (1844), and whose treatment of light influenced the Impressionists.*

¹ Winston S. Churchill, *Thoughts and Adventures: Churchill Reflects on Spies, Cartoons, Flying and the Future*, "Painting as a Pastime," ed. James W. Muller (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2009) p. 323

Multiple choice questions based on excerpts from “Painting as a Pastime” by Winston S. Churchill

1. Churchill uses each of the senses in discussing painting EXCEPT:
 - a) **sight**: the dim pale silhouettes, *line 60*
 - b) **smell**: forensic argument, *line 35*
 - c) **taste**: delicious to squeeze out, *line 2*
 - d) **hearing**: each a key lower than what they repeat, *line 53*
 - e) **touch**: exquisite lacery of winter branches, *line 59*
2. The extended analogy comparing trying to paint with trying to fight a battle is exemplified best in the discussion of:
 - a) reconnaissance, *lines 41-45*
 - b) atmosphere, *lines 44-46*
 - c) gilding, *lines 54-57*
 - d) lacery, *lines 59-60*
 - e) forensics, *lines 35-36*
3. The heightened sense of observation noted by Churchill comes across most clearly in this line:
 - a) “When we look at the Turners...” *line 24*
 - b) “What a lot of people!” *line 64*
 - c) “...each different in shadow and in sunlight” *lines 52-53*
 - d) “...interest invests every walk” *line 50*
 - e) “Nature is one of the chief delights” *line 66*
4. The word “subordinate” in line 29 most nearly means:
 - a) lower
 - b) unimportant
 - c) small
 - d) pale
 - e) orderly
5. The reader may infer that Turner’s works including *Rain, Steam and Speed* :
 - a) are influenced by the Impressionists
 - b) are painted on large canvases
 - c) influenced Churchill
 - d) were all of battles
 - e) had gilded or silvered surfaces
6. Churchill alludes to but does not explain:
 - a) how both commander and painter must plan ahead
 - b) how both commander and painter need to keep a strong reserve
 - c) the effect of light and shadow
 - d) how trying to paint is like a trying to fight a battle

7. The reader may infer that Churchill takes up painting as a pastime:
 - a) to relieve stress
 - b) following a war injury
 - c) after the age of 40
 - d) to please his wife
 - e) to mimic Turner
8. Churchill notes attributes that suit both painters and commanders, including:
 - a) keen eyesight
 - b) a single unity of conception
 - c) astonishment at what may be found in landscapes
 - d) philosophical adjudication
 - e) interlocked arguments
9. The tone evident in this passage may be described as:
 - a) nostalgic
 - b) sentimental
 - c) martial
 - d) ruminative
 - e) apologetic
10. The overall meaning of the text may be stated as:
 - a) The challenges of painting bring great rewards.
 - b) Painting requires great concentration
 - c) Painting is a battle from beginning to end.
 - d) Colors make the greatest difference.
 - e) The best paintings, like the best battles, are on a grand scale.

ANSWER KEY to excerpts from PAINTING AS A PASTIME:

1. b
2. a
3. d
4. b
5. b
6. b
7. c
8. b
9. d
10. a