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Text piece

**Poetry Study Reference: An Irish airman foresees his death, W.B. Yeats**

Compiled by

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Resources consulted

**How to approach a poem, JSK Publishers**

## ENGLISH HOME LANGUAGE

### PRESCRIBED POETRY FOR NSC EVALUATION 2009

<b>Achebe</b>	<i>Refugee mother and child</i>
<b>Banoobhai</b>	<i>You cannot know the fears I have</i>
<b>Cummings</b>	<i>i thank You God for most this amazing</i>
<b>Day-Lewis</b>	<i>Walking away</i>
<b>Dikeni</b>	<i>Love poem for my country</i>
<b>Eliot</b>	<i>Preludes</i>
<b>Ghose</b>	<i>Decomposition</i>
<b>Keats</b>	<i>To Autumn</i>
<b>Livingstone</b>	<i>Sunstrike</i>
<b>Mungoshi</b>	<i>If you don't stay bitter for too long</i>
<b>Plath</b>	<i>Mushrooms</i>
<b>Serote</b>	<i>City Johannesburg</i>
<b>Shakespeare</b>	<i>To me, fair friend</i>
<b>Shelley</b>	<i>Ozymandias</i>
<b>Yeats</b>	<i>An Irish airman foresees his death</i>

## An Irish airman foresees his death **William Butler Yeats**

**Biographical Note** (Contributor: Lorraine Weir, Ph.D., Prof. of English and Comparative Literature, Univ. of British Columbia.)

Yeats, pronounced yayts, William Butler (1865-1939), an Irish poet and dramatist, won the 1923 Nobel Prize for literature. Many critics consider him the greatest poet of his time. Yeats led the Irish Literary Revival, a movement of the late 1800's and early 1900's that stimulated new appreciation of traditional Irish literature. The movement also encouraged the creation of works written in the spirit of Irish culture, as distinct from English culture.

Yeats developed elaborate theories about history as a recurring cycle of events. He expressed his views about history and life through the use of old Irish tales and the facts and legends of Irish history. His views also reflect his belief in the supernatural. Yeats published his theories in *A Vision* (1925), a book that can help with the interpretation of some of his more difficult poems.

Yeats was born in Dublin and lived in London for part of his childhood. He spent many holidays in Sligo, a county in western Ireland that he loved and often wrote about. In 1898, he joined the authors Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn in establishing the Irish Literary Theatre. It was reorganized in 1904 as the Abbey Theatre, which became world famous.

The Irish Literary Theatre was founded partly to support Irish nationalism by encouraging the writing and production of plays about Irish life. The theater performed most of Yeats's 26 plays, and he served until his death as one of the directors who managed the institution. The theater's first production was Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, written in 1891. This play was inspired in part by the author's love for Maud Gonne, a beautiful Irish nationalist leader. She became the subject of many of his plays and love lyrics.

Yeats's verse, unlike that of most poets, improved as he grew older. He wrote much of his best work in the last 10 years of his life. His most important works were published in *Collected Plays* (1952) and *The Poems: A New Edition* (1984). Memoirs, containing autobiographical writings, were published in 1973.

## ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

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<http://webhome.idirect.com/~francisc/yeats/airmanpoem.htm>

### Title

The title "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is reflective of the fact that the airman foresaw his impending death. This title is significant in that it reflects the fate that many people fighting in war face. They know their death is approaching them with very little they can do about it.

### Speaker

This poem is recited in first person. The poet is recounting the thoughts that are going through his mind as his death approaches. This choice of voice is important because it gives insight into the thoughts of the airman fighting on the verge of death.

### Setting

This poem takes place around 1916 during one of the Irish civil wars in the skies over Ireland. The mood and atmosphere created by Yeats is of a solemn, peaceful tone. The pilot sees his death forthcoming yet he does not seem regretful or scared, but rather accepts the fate he is going to encounter.

### Structure

The poem is one stanza long. It is divided into four sections and in each section the first and third lines rhyme, as do the second and fourth. There are approximately 8 syllables per line. The simple form reflects the rather simple theme of the poem.

### Speech Figures

The poem has a rhyme pattern of *ababcdcdefefghgh*. A metaphor present in the poem is "Drove to this tumult in the clouds." (Yeats) Through this metaphor it explains that once the narrator had reached the peak of his flight, he has also reached the peak of his life. From here he will encounter his death. Another example of a metaphor presented in this poem is "A waste of breath the years behind." (Yeats) This passage from the poem is a metaphor which compares the years that have past and how they were a waste of time. An example of irony found in the poem is when he says he does not love or want to protect the people of the country he fights for, yet when people go to war they usually fight with honour for the country they represent.

*Since Ireland was considered a part of The British Commonwealth, the Irish were expected to act for the good of the Mother Land. That also meant dying for the Mother Land. The Irish had no quarrel with anyone except their own rulers.*

### Sense To Sound

Words were chosen carefully to fit the rhyme scheme and make it more appealing to

the reader with the attempt to stress every second syllable.

### **Summary**

This poem captures the essence of the mindset of an airman facing death. This insight is what makes the poem memorable. This poem is about an Irish airman pilot fighting in the war awaiting his death. He is prepared for death because after reflecting on his life he realizes that it has been a waste of time. This is reflected in the quote, "A waste of breath the years behind / In balance with this life, this death." (Yeats)

*The Kiltartan Cross was a group of Roman Catholics that were directly related to the Air Force. These people had their own tartan, or their own colors for their kilts that they wore. The different types of tartan colors signified different groups of people whether it be a clan of people or a military group. They are poor because they do not have their own country. They are under British rule.*

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education is not received, it is achieved

## **ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEM**

Contributor: Mrs. Hamilton, Hutchesons' Grammar School

Contributor: Imaad Isaacs

**“I know that I shall meet my fate**

**Somewhere among the clouds above”**

The anonymous soldier is aware he will die in his plane

**“Those I fight I do not hate**

**Those that I guard I do not love;”**

He is not fighting because he dislikes the people he is fighting against (Germans) nor does he like the people he is fighting for (English). Ireland's long history of explosive separatism with Britain is a well-known story. Since the late 19th century, Ireland has sought complete independence from British rule.

**“My country is Kiltartan Cross,**

**My countrymen Kiltartan's poor”**

Although the airman fights on the side of the British, he asserts himself as an Irishman, specifically from a region with a distinctive history and dialect. The repetition of “My country” shows how patriotic he is.

**“No likely end could bring them loss**

**Or leave them happier than before.”**

The soldier knows that if he dies in the war it will not affect his country; he will remain as the unnamed soldier.

**“Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,**

**Nor public man, nor cheering crowds”**

Nothing is compelling him to fight. Neither government, duty, public acclaim nor fame compels him to fight.

**“A lonely impulse of delight”**

he is fighting out of his own free will — of individualism — Yeats was not only praising, but was singling out as the thrust of the poem. The soldier just enjoys fighting/flying.

**“I balanced all, brought to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath.”**

He has thought through it all. Feels that life is like a waste

**“A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.”**

What is in front of him just seems to be a waste of time. He feels that dying in the sky, doing something that he loves, will be a meaningful thing- giving him a purpose in life.

**COMMENTARY** (courtesy: Franca S. - <http://francas.blogspot.com>)

This short sixteen-line poem has a very simple structure: lines metered in iambic tetrameter, and four grouped quatrains of alternating rhymes: ABABCDCDEFEGHGH, or four repetitions of the basic ABAB scheme utilizing different rhymes.

The speaker, an Irish airman fighting in World War I, declares that he knows he will die fighting among the clouds. He says that he does not hate those he fights, nor love those he guards. His country is "Kiltartan's Cross," his countrymen "Kiltartan's poor." He says that no outcome in the war will make their lives worse or better than before the war began. He says that he did not decide to fight because of a law or a sense of duty, nor because of "public men" or "cheering crowds." Rather, "a lonely impulse of delight" drove him to "this tumult in the clouds." He says that he weighed his life in his mind, and found that "The years to come seemed waste of breath, / A waste of breath the years behind."

This simple poem is one of Yeats's most explicit statements about the First World War, and illustrates both his active political consciousness ("Those I fight I do not hate, / Those I guard I do not love") and his increasing inclination for a kind of hard-edged mystical joy (the airman was driven to the clouds by "A lonely impulse of delight"). The poem, which, like flying, emphasizes balance, essentially enacts a kind of accounting, whereby the airman lists every factor weighing upon his situation and his vision of death, and rejects every possible factor he believes to be false: he does not hate or love his enemies or his allies, his country will neither be benefited nor hurt by any outcome of the war, he does not fight for political or moral motives but because of his "impulse of delight"; his past life seems a waste, his future life seems that it would be a waste, and his death will balance his life.

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***“He is not of us, unless he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself”***

Feedback is welcomed, whether positive or negative, we'd love to hear from you. Please forward your comments to [feedback@imaad.info](mailto:feedback@imaad.info).

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