An Irish Airman Foresees his Death

POEM TEXT

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

SUMMARY

I know that I will die somewhere up in the clouds. I don't hate the people that I'm fighting against—and I don't love the people that I'm fighting for. I'm from the countryside around Kiltartan Church in Ireland, and my people are the poor folk in that area. Regardless of the outcome of this war, they won't feel any worse or any better than they do now. I didn't decide to fight because of law or duty; I wasn't encouraged by the politicians or the cheers of the crowd. I was driven to this fight in the sky by the sheer delight and loneliness of it. I weighed everything, thought it all through. The years ahead of me seemed like a waste of breath and so did the years behind me—in comparison to this way of living and dying.

THEMES

WAR AND DEATH

This is not a poem about heroism or patriotic fervor—though it could be: as a fighter pilot in World War I, its speaker certainly *is* brave, even heroic. But he isn't motivated by a love of country or a desire to protect his fellow citizens, and nor does he risk his life to win honor or glory. Instead, the speaker flies into battle because he feels like the sheer pleasure and exhilaration of flying are the best that he can hope for in his life. The poem thus breaks with many of the traditions of war poetry. Instead of celebrating the speaker's heroism and courage, the poem meditates on the senselessness of war and the futility of patriotism.

The speaker is well aware of the dangers he faces as he flies into battle. In fact, he is sure that he will die. But his sacrifice is not motivated by a desire to protect his fellow citizens. As he says in line 4, "Those that I guard I do not love." Nor is his sacrifice motivated by political feelings. As he says in line 3, "Those that I fight I do not hate." Later he insists that he was not motivated by politicians or "cheering crowds," full of patriotic fervor. Indeed, for the speaker and his countrymen, the outcome of the war doesn't really matter at all! It doesn't matter whether they win or lose, the speaker says, because either outcome won't "leave them happier than before."

The speaker systematically dismisses all the reasons why people usually go to war. He isn't fighting for honor, for country, or even because he cares who wins. Readers might wonder, then, why the speaker bothers fighting at all. The speaker's answer to this is surprising. He fights simply for the sheer emotion of it—the sense of exhilaration it gives him. He is driven, he says, by "a lonely impulse of delight." Nothing else in his life seems worth pursuing: both his past and his future seem to him to be a "waste of breath." In other words, he regards his life as pointless, so he is willing to sacrifice it for this dangerous "delight."

The speaker of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" thus comes across as very pessimistic. He can picture his death, but he doesn't seem particularly troubled by it. He doesn't resist it; he doesn't fight to save his own life. And he doesn't strive to make his life—or his death—meaningful. He isn't interested in winning glory, or in making the lives of his fellow citizens better—and, in fact, he seems fairly certain that his death won't change anything for him or for them. Instead, he seeks a transitory and dangerous pleasure—arguing that it's the best thing he can hope for in life.

In doing so the speaker offers a forceful critique of war itself, which he suggests is pointless. And he also critiques the patriotic fervor of those who support the war—suggesting that they are distant from and ignorant of the realities of the soldiers who fight it. In this way, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" not only breaks from the traditions of war poetry; it also criticizes war itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

IRISH IDENTITY AND BRITISH WAR

The speaker of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" knows that he will die in battle, but he doesn't really seem to care. He also knows that his death won't change the lives of his countrymen, for better or for worse. The poem offers a subtle, implicit reason for this pessimism: the speaker is an "Irish Airman," fighting in World War I. In other words, he's fighting on behalf of Britain—which, at the time the poem was written, ruled Ireland in a brutal and oppressive fashion. The speaker's pessimism is thus intended as a sharp criticism of British rule. In the absence of Irish political freedom, the speaker suggests, his life is meaningless.

Though the poem never explicitly critiques British rule, it does implicitly highlight the suffering and poverty of Irish people living under it. When the speaker describes his "countrymen," for instance, he calls them "Kiltartan's poor." Kiltartan is a region in County Galway, on the western coast of Ireland. Calling them "Kiltartan's poor," the speaker defines his "countrymen" in two ways: through their poverty and through their connection to the country where they live, to Ireland itself, with its rural churches and small communities.

The speaker is then quick to note that Britain's participation in World War I won't help lift these people out of poverty. If the British win, he says, it won't make "Kiltartan's poor" any "happier than before"; if they lose, that won't "bring them loss." In other words, the speaker quietly accuses the British of neglecting the Irish. Instead of working to make the lives of their Irish subjects better, the British invest their time and resources in big projects like World War I—projects that don't matter to the speaker or his countrymen. And, worse, the British ask Irishmen like the speaker to fight and die in the war—even though it has no bearing on their lives.

In this context, the speaker's pessimism about his own life seems political: it is a pointed critique of life under British rule. For the speaker, that life isn't really much of a life at all. The speaker goes so far as to refer to it as a "waste of breath." And, the speaker says, that's true of the past, and it's also true of the future, "the years to come" and "the years behind." Even if he survives the war, the speaker doesn't imagine that his life will take on meaning; it won't become rich, pleasurable, or rewarding. After all, as he has already argued, the war isn't going to change his life or the lives of his countrymen. In this sense, the speaker's pessimism subtly indicts British rule, suggesting that it has rendered his life so pointless that his only recourse is to seek the suicidal pleasure of fighting in a war he doesn't even support. British rule has rendered his life—and the lives of his countrymen—meaningless.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;

The first four lines of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" establish the poem's themes and its form. The speaker of the poem is an Irish fighter pilot, fighting on the side of the British in World War I. He opens the poem with a surprising declaration: he knows that he will die in battle. He doesn't know when or where, just that it will happen "somewhere among the clouds above"—in other words, somewhere in the sky.

Because the poem was written in memory of a real Irish fighter pilot who died during World War I, Major Robert Gregory, it is often considered an elegy—one of several Yeats wrote for the young pilot. However, it breaks with many of the traditions of the elegy as a genre. This is already evident in the first four lines—after all, here the speaker is elegizing himself, before he's even died!

Lines 3-4 are even more startling. Calmly, almost casually, the speaker tells the reader that he doesn't "hate" the people that he fights. Nor does he "love" the people that he fights for—that he "guards." The two lines are parallel in construction: they exactly have the same grammatical structure. The parallelism stresses the speaker's indifference: he doesn't care about either his enemies *or* his friends. And that raises questions about the speaker's motivations. The reader might wonder *why* the speaker is willing to die in battle if he's so indifferent, if he isn't motivated by the usual things that drive soldiers into battle—like love of country, fear of an enemy, patriotism, etc.

The speaker of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is confronting something potentially very scary—his own death. But, for the most part, he is calm, confident, and collected. That confidence is reflected in the poem's form. It is a single, 16-line stanza written in iambic tetrameter, a meter that follows a da DUM rhythm, with four feet per line. It can be divided into four rhyming quatrains, with an *ABAB* rhyme scheme. In both its meter and its rhyme scheme, the poem is very smooth and controlled. It has few metrical substitutions; it uses perfect rhymes throughout. Although the speaker is confronting his own death, he remains calm and controlled—even indifferent to it.

Or at least, that's how things appear on the surface. The poem gives a couple of hints that the speaker isn't quite as indifferent as he pretends to be. Those hints appear in moments where the poem deviates from its usual patterns, when the speaker breaks his own rhetorical and poetic habits. There are two good examples of such breaks in the poem's first four lines. Note that the poem is highly end-stopped; the speaker uses

only four enjambments in the whole poem. One of those enjambments appears in the poem's first line—where the speaker is talking about his own death.

And note the *way* that he talks about death. Although the speaker generally avoids metaphor, speaking in direct, straightforward sentences, he uses a metaphor in line 1. Instead of saying directly that he will die, he uses a euphemism, saying that he will "meet [his] fate." Contemplating his own death causes the speaker to break his habits, slipping—briefly—into metaphor and enjambment. These subtle changes suggest a lingering sense of anxiety that runs beneath his otherwise controlled, confident poem.

LINES 5-8

My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.

In lines 5-8, the speaker describes the place where he comes from and the people who live there. He's from County Galway—a rural part of Ireland, on the west coast of the country.

The speaker makes an interesting choice in the way that he conveys this information to the reader. He calls the place he's from "Kiltartan Cross." "Kiltartan Cross" refers to a small town in County Galway. Calling it "Kiltartan Cross"—and not, for instance, "Kiltartan School" or "Kiltartan Market"—is a subtle acknowledgement of the important place that Catholicism holds in the lives of many Irish people. That hints at the poem's central irony: while the speaker is an Irish Catholic, he fights on behalf of England—a Protestant country that, at the time of the poem's writing, had ruled Ireland for several centuries in an often brutal and oppressive fashion. His allegiances to his faith and his home are in tension with the country he fights for.

In lines 6-8, the speaker describes the people who live in County Galway, his "countrymen," calling them "Kiltartan's poor." Again, the way the speaker describes them is revealing: they are defined through their poverty and through their connection to the town. The speaker uses parallelism again here: lines 5-6 have the same grammatical structure. The parallelism suggests that the reader should encounter these lines as a unit, a single thought: and, in that way, the speaker also closely aligns his "countrymen" with the Catholic Church ("Kiltartan Cross").

Although the speaker is describing his home and his "countrymen," he doesn't do so in a particularly fond or romantic way. Rather, the description in lines 5-6 is full of sharp consonant sounds:

My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,

With its harsh /r/, /t/, and /k/ sounds, the line sounds tough and abrasive, suggesting that Kiltartan is a somewhat harsh place.

And by extension, it also captures the difficulty of the lives of Kiltartan's people. For them, the war won't make any difference—it doesn't matter if England wins or loses, because their lives will remain difficult. Lines 7-8 note this explicitly, saying that there's no outcome that will make these people's lives worse ("bring them loss") or better ("happier than before"). With this point, the poem subtly accuses the English of neglecting the well-being of their Irish subjects in favor of big, distant wars like World War I—wars that they expect Irish people to fight in, even though they don't stand to improve their own lives by doing so.

These lines exhibit the confidence and formal control that runs through the poem. They are written in iambic tetrameter, without significant metrical variations. They are rhymed *ABAB*, and they are mostly end-stopped, though line 7 is enjambed—which might indicate a crack in the speaker's indifference: perhaps he is quietly upset that the war won't improve the lives of his "countrymen." Nevertheless, the speaker remains strikingly in control of his poem and its formal elements—even as he describes confronting his own death.

LINES 9-12

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;

In lines 9-12, the speaker explains what motivates him to fight—and just as importantly, what *doesn't* motivate him. He starts by listing all the usual reasons why people fight in wars: because the law requires them to do so, because they feel obligated, because politicians and cheering crowds get them excited. But, the speaker insists, he isn't motivated by any of those things. He doesn't feel patriotic fervor—symbolized by the "cheering crowds." He isn't motivated by politicians ("public men"), or law, or duty. The speaker emphasizes his rejection of these motivations by repeating the word "nor" throughout lines 9-10—instances of anaphora and polysyndeton.

Then, in lines 11-12, he finally reveals what *does* motivate him. His reason is surprising, even a little weird. He says that he was driven into battle—"this tumult in the clouds"—by "a lonely impulse of delight." In other words, he enjoys the lonely pleasure of being in the airplane. He enjoys the dogfights with other pilots for their own sake, disconnected from any larger motivation or reason. The reader might have questions about this—whether this is really a good enough reason to fight in a war—but the speaker doesn't address those doubts until the poem's final 4 lines.

Although the speaker uses alliteration, assonance, and consonance throughout the poem, these lines are particularly rich in sonic play. And some of the things the speaker does with

sound are unusual and unexpected. For instance, alliteration often binds words and ideas together, suggesting connections between things that might not otherwise seem related. But the speaker uses alliteration here to emphasize tensions instead. The reader can see that in the alliteration between "me" and "men" in lines 9-10 and "delight" and "drove" in lines 11-12. In both cases, the speaker wants to emphasize the difference between the alliterative words. He *isn't* like the "public men," and something "delightful" generally doesn't involve force or coercion—as the word "drove" implies. In creating connections at the level of sound between words that are in tension with each other, the speaker plays with the reader's expectations about his own motivations.

The speaker also uses assonance to important effect in lines 10-12. The same /u/ sound appears in both "public" and "impulse," as well as "tumult." That connection is important—and it suggests that the speaker's motivations may not matter as much as he thinks they do. Though the speaker draws a distinction between his private, personal "impulse" and the cajoling of the "public men," he still ends up in the "tumult"—just where they want him. And the enjambment in line 11 similarly suggests a moment of hesitation, of doubt—as though the speaker is wondering whether his motivation is really as important as he says it.

Like the previous 8 lines, lines 9-12 are in iambic tetrameter and they rhyme *ABAB*. Except for line 11, they're all end-stopped. The speaker's confidence—even as he confronts death—is again evident in the poem's form. Its rhymes are easy and uncomplicated; its meter unblemished by metrical substitutions. There are signs now and then that the speaker has some doubts, but mostly the poem remains collected and confident.

LINES 13-16

I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

In the final 4 lines of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," the speaker justifies his decision to sacrifice his own life in combat. In lines 11-12, he revealed his reason for fighting: he is guided by a "lonely impulse of delight." In other words, he just likes flying and fighting.

That might not seem like a good enough reason to sacrifice his life, though, and the speaker seems to recognize that his reasoning might puzzle or shock the reader. So he explains in lines 13-16 how he came to that decision, emphasizing the care and consideration that went into his choice. He "balanced all, brought all to mind." In other words, he thought through everything in his life, weighed the good and the bad—and realized that his life is meaningless. Up to now, his life has been a "waste of breath" and he doesn't expect things to change; his future is also a "waste of breath." So it doesn't seem unreasonable to sacrifice his life for a "lonely impulse of delight," since his life is meaningless anyway.

The speaker employs two poetic devices to help convince the reader that he really has thought this all through. First, note the caesuras in lines 13 and 16. They divide up the lines neatly. In line 13, the caesura splits the line evenly in half; in line 16, it separates "life" and "death." The lines themselves are balanced. And the speaker also employs an ornate chiasmus of repeating phrases and grammar which runs through the poem's final four lines in an *ABCCBA* pattern:

> I balanced all, brought all to mind,
> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind
> In balance with this life, this death.

Broken down, that pattern looks like:

- *A*: "I balanced all"
- *B*: "The years to come"
- *C*: "waste of breath"
- *C*: "waste of breath"
- *B*: "the years behind"
- *A*: "In balance with this life

The whole final quatrain focuses on the idea of "balance" and is itself elegantly balanced by these repeated phrases. So the reader feels confident that the speaker has really considered all of this thoughtfully and carefully—after all, the poem is so carefully organized.

That sense of confidence is reinforced by the strong end-stops in these lines, like line 14. The forceful ending to the line cuts off any more detailed consideration of the speaker's future. As is so often the case in this poem, the speaker remains confident and in command of his poem—even as he confronts death. Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in strong iambic tetrameter and rhymed *ABAB*. The speaker's rhymes are direct and his meter is completely steady. But there are also a couple of signs of underlying anxiety. Note the speaker's turn to metaphor: he doesn't directly say that his life is meaningless, but instead uses a metaphor, calling it a "waste of breath." And the enjambment in line 15 undermines the definitive, strong end-stop in line 14. So while the speaker is generally very confident, these small signs indicate that he remains anxious about his choice and nervous about his "fate."

As the poem wraps up, then, the speaker offers his strongest hint about why he's willing to die: he simply thinks his life is meaningless. This in turn reflects his position as an Irish pilot fighting on behalf of England, the country that oppresses him and his "countrymen." The speaker suggests something deeper about British rule over Ireland: it makes life itself meaningless.

The poem is also an elegy—it was written to memorialize Major Robert Gregory. But, as it comes to a close, it's clear that it breaks many of the expectations that come along with the elegy as a genre. Traditionally elegies move from mourning to consolation—the speaker starts out in deep grief, but by the end of the poem the speaker finds some reason to be hopeful again. "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" offers no such cause for renewed hope. It ends in the same place it starts: with the speaker wrestling with a life that has been made meaningless, trying to find the only "delight" he can.

SYMBOLS

CHEERING CROWDS

In line 10, the speaker says that he wasn't motivated to fight by "cheering crowds." Here, "cheering crowds" is a symbol for patriotism.

The "crowds" are "cheering" in support of the war; their energy and enthusiasm come from their love for their country. (And it presumably also comes from the "public men"—in other words, politicians—who have been riling them up.) The "cheering crowds" support the war—and go to fight in it—because doing so is a way of expressing their conviction and support for the nation. The speaker, however, doesn't share that passion or conviction; this symbol makes it clear that his decision to fight isn't motivated by patriotism. Indeed, throughout the poem the speaker quietly critiques patriotism itself, suggesting that it is an empty reason to fight.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "cheering crowds"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" contains a lot of end-stopped lines. Indeed, 12 of the poem's 16 lines—three quarters of the poem—are end-stopped. The end-stops reflect the speaker's confidence and certainty as he confronts death, and they also help underline his indifference with regard to his own fate.

The reader can see the speaker's confidence at work In lines 3-4:

> Those that I fight I do not hate,
> Those that I guard I do not love;

Both lines are end-stopped. This makes them feel firm and definite. The speaker doesn't seem to have any doubts about his feelings toward his enemies or his countrymen. He is neither filled with hatred toward his enemies nor is he filled with love for his fellow citizens.

In line 14, the speaker turns to end-stop to underscore his indifference about his own life:

> The years to come seemed waste of breath,

Once again, the line is end-stopped. This is striking. After all, the speaker doesn't really know what will happen in the future—there's at least the possibility that the rest of his life won't be a "waste of breath." But the speaker doesn't entertain that possibility. He has no doubt that the rest of his life will be meaningless. The end-stopped line contributes to that sense of certainty. Using such firm, definite end-stopped lines throughout the poem, the speaker emphasizes his certainty and confidence—even as he confronts his own death.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "above;"
- **Line 3:** "hate,"
- **Line 4:** "love;"
- **Line 5:** "Cross,"
- **Line 6:** "poor,"
- **Line 8:** "before."
- **Line 9:** "fight,"
- **Line 10:** "crowds,"
- **Line 12:** "clouds;"
- **Line 13:** "mind,"
- **Line 14:** "breath,"
- **Line 16:** "death."

ENJAMBMENT

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" doesn't use enjambment often. Indeed, only 4 of the poem's 16 lines are enjambed—just a quarter of the total. So when enjambments do appear, they are disruptive and unexpected. They often mark a break in the speaker's otherwise calm and confident demeanor.

For example, take a look at the enjambment in the poem's first line:

> I know that I shall meet my fate
> Somewhere among the clouds above;

The poem starts with an astonishing revelation: the speaker knows that he will die. But he doesn't know where or when—it could be tomorrow or next year, on the front or during a training mission. There's a moment of hesitation and doubt. That's unusual for this speaker: elsewhere he is confident and definite, direct and unhesitating. That hesitation and doubt is

reflected in the enjambment, which leaves the reader hanging, wondering where, when, and how the speaker will die.

That doubt and hesitation reappear in the enjambment across lines 11-12:

> A lonely impulse of delight
> Drove to this tumult in the clouds;

Here, the speaker is explaining why he fights. He isn't motivated by patriotism; he doesn't hate his enemies. Instead, he simply enjoys flying: he finds in it "a lonely impulse of delight." The reader might expect an end-stop here. After all, the speaker is answering the question at the heart of the poem: why he continues to fight, even though he knows that he will die. The reader might expect the speaker to be definite and confident about his reasons. But the enjambment suggests that he isn't—not entirely. There is some shadow of doubt that persists and causes him to question whether the "delight" he feels is really worth sacrificing his life for.

Overall, the poem's enjambments express doubt and hesitation—in a speaker who usually doesn't feel, or at least doesn't admit to feeling, those emotions. They thus create some doubt and hesitation for the reader as well. In the few moments where enjambment creeps into the poem, the reader begins to feel that things are not as definite and certain as the speaker insists.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "fate / Somewhere"
- **Lines 7-8:** "loss / Or"
- **Lines 11-12:** "delight / Drove"
- **Lines 15-16:** "behind / In"

ALLITERATION

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" uses alliteration to emphasize the speaker's unusual position: a heroic fighter pilot who has no interest in heroism.

Note, for instance, the alliterative /m/ sound in lines 9-10:

> Nor law, nor duty bade **m**e fight,
> Nor public **m**en, nor cheering crowds…

Here the speaker is laying out all the usual motivations for fighting in a war—a sense of duty, a sense of patriotism, the encouragement of politicians. Surprisingly, though, none of those things "bade [him] fight." His reasons are stranger, less expected. The alliteration between "me" and "men" thus works in a surprising, counterintuitive way. Often, alliteration binds together words and ideas, suggesting surprising connections between them. But here, the alliteration creates tension between the poem's literal meaning and its sound. It sounds suggests that there *is* a link between "me" and the "public men," while on a literal level it insists that no such connection exists. In other words, the alliteration plays with the reader's expectations—after all, most soldiers are motivated by "public men"; it makes sense to think that the speaker of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is too. The speaker almost satisfies the reader's expectations, then pulls away.

Indeed, the speaker often uses alliteration to emphasize moments of tension—not moments of connection. The reader can find another example in lines 11-12:

> A lonely impulse of **d**elight
> **D**rove **t**o **t**his tumult in the clouds…

There's a tension between the words "delight" and "drove": "delight" is something nice and pleasurable. To be "driven" implies being forced to do something against one's will. But the alliteration links the two words together. Once again, the similarity in sound between the words emphasizes the difference in their meaning. And then, the firm repeated /t/ sound of "to" and "tumult" suggests that now the speaker can't escape this chaotic fighting; the odd contrast between "delight" and "drove" has had serious consequences. In this way, the poem's alliteration consistently calls attention to the strangeness of the speaker's position, the way his motivations for fighting and dying are in tension with the reader's expectations—and social expectations more broadly.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "m," "m"
- **Line 2:** "a," "a"
- **Line 3:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 4:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 5:** "c," "K," "C"
- **Line 6:** "c," "K"
- **Line 7:** "l," "l"
- **Line 8:** "l," "th," "th"
- **Line 9:** "N," "l," "n," "m"
- **Line 10:** "N," "m," "n"
- **Line 11:** "d"
- **Line 12:** "D," "t," "t"
- **Line 13:** "b," "b," "r"
- **Line 14:** "w," "br"
- **Line 15:** "w," "br," "b"
- **Line 16:** "b," "w"

ASSONANCE

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" mostly uses assonance to help build the poem's sense of rhythm and music. Almost all of the poem's rhymes involve assonance—as in the strong /a/ sound that appears in "fate" and "hate" in lines 1 and 3 or the /o/ sound in "Cross" and "loss" in lines 5 and 7.

These strong assonant sounds not only make the poem's rhyme work; they also help build its sense of regularity and control. Although the speaker is confronting something terrifying—his own death—his rhymes remain steady and unperturbed. The poem's assonance thus works with its meter and rhyme to convey the speaker's confidence as he confronts death.

At times, specific instances of assonance also play an important role in supporting the poem's themes. For instance, note the matching /u/ sounds that appear in lines 10-12, in the words "public," "impulse," and "tumult." It's a potentially revealing play of sound. In these lines, the speaker is explaining why he decided to go to war—why he sought out this "tumult in the clouds." He wasn't motivated by "public men" but rather by his own "lonely impulse of delight." The speaker thus draws a distinction between the "public men" and his own "impulse." But the assonance suggests that the distinction doesn't matter in the end: after all, the "tumult" in which the speaker finds himself is linked to both the "public men" and his own "impulse." Regardless of why he fights, he does fight—and, in doing so, he ends up serving the very "public men" he despises.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 2:** "o," "a," "o," "a," "o"
- **Line 3:** "o," "I," "i," "I," "a"
- **Line 4:** "o," "o"
- **Line 5:** "o"
- **Line 6:** "oo"
- **Line 7:** "y," "o"
- **Line 8:** "ea," "i," "e," "o"
- **Line 9:** "o," "o," "y," "e," "i"
- **Line 10:** "o," "u," "o," "o"
- **Line 11:** "o," "y," "u," "o," "e," "i"
- **Line 12:** "o," "u," "ou"
- **Line 13:** "a," "a," "i"
- **Line 14:** "ea," "ee," "a," "o," "ea"
- **Line 15:** "a," "o," "ea," "ea," "e," "i"
- **Line 16:** "i," "i," "i," "ea"

CONSONANCE

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" mostly uses consonance to emphasize the conflict and tension it describes. It's a poem about war—in which its speaker foresees his own violent death. And the poem often has a brittle, caustic sound to it, a consequence of its dense pattern of consonance. There's thus a close fit between the way the poem sounds and the difficult world it describes.

The reader can see this in line 5, with its harsh /k/, /t/, and /r/ sounds:

> My country is Kiltartan Cross

The line bristles with consonants. That might be surprising—after all, the speaker's describing the part of Ireland that he comes from. But, as the speaker reveals as the poem goes on, life isn't easy where he's from; the people are poor and oppressed by English rule. What's more, there's no hope that the war will make life any better for these people, as the speaker says in lines 7-8. The harsh sound of the consonants emphasizes this harsh reality, an effect that continues in line 6:

> My countrymen Kiltartan's poor

The poem thus uses consonance to capture the speaker's hard feelings—about his own life, about the place he comes from, and about the war that he will die fighting in.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "t," "m," "t," "m," "t"
- **Line 2:** "m," "m"
- **Line 3:** "Th," "th," "t," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 4:** "Th," "th," "t," "d," "d," "t"
- **Line 5:** "M," "c," "n," "t," "r," "K," "t," "rt," "n," "C," "r"
- **Line 6:** "M," "c," "ntr," "m," "n," "K," "t," "rt," "n," "r"
- **Line 7:** "l," "l," "d," "d," "l"
- **Line 8:** "l," "th," "r," "th," "r"
- **Line 9:** "N," "l," "n," "d," "t," "d," "m," "t"
- **Line 10:** "N," "m," "n"
- **Line 11:** "l," "l," "m," "l," "d," "l"
- **Line 12:** "D," "t," "t," "m," "t," "d"
- **Line 13:** "b," "l," "ll," "b," "ll"
- **Line 14:** "r," "s," "m," "s," "m," "s," "b," "r," "h"
- **Line 15:** "s," "b," "r," "th," "r," "s," "b"
- **Line 16:** "b," "l," "c," "th," "th," "s," "l," "th," "s," "th"

METAPHOR

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is not a highly metaphorical poem. For the most part, the speaker is straightforward, literal, and direct. But he does turn to metaphor now and then, especially when he's discussing his own life—and his own death. For example, in line 1, the speaker uses a metaphor to describe dying:

> I know that I shall meet my fate

Instead of directly saying that he will die, the speaker uses a metaphor: turning dying, something physical and literal, into the abstract concept of fate. Similarly, at the end of the poem, the speaker turns to metaphor to describe his own life:

> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind.

Here, the speaker uses metaphor to indicate that his life is

meaningless: both his past and his future are a "waste of breath." This is a decisive, forceful judgment—so it's striking, once again, that the speaker turns to metaphor, instead of a more direct, literal formulation.

This pattern—using metaphor to discuss his own life and death—thus suggests that, beneath the confidence and control that characterize so much of the poem, the speaker experiences some ambiguity and doubt about his decision to die in battle. In other words, the poem's occasional metaphors subtly undermine its message, indicating that the speaker can't quite face the literal reality of his own death, despite his insistence that he can.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I shall meet my fate"
- **Line 12:** "this tumult in the clouds"
- **Lines 14-15:** "The years to come seemed waste of breath, / A waste of breath the years behind"

REPETITION

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" uses a range of different kinds of repetition throughout. For example, in lines 3-4, the speaker uses parallelism:

> Those that I fight I do not hate,
> Those that I guard I do not love;

The sentences have exactly the same grammatical structure. But they concern very different groups of people—enemies and allies. The use of parallelism underscores the speaker's feelings about these different groups: he feels indifferent to both. He doesn't love his allies and he doesn't hate his enemies.

In lines 5-6, the speaker uses parallelism again, but to different effect:

> My country is Kiltartan Cross,
> My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,

Here, the speaker is explaining where's from: a small town in County Galway on the southwest coast of Ireland. Note that he defines the place by referencing a church in the county, "Kiltartan Cross"—a subtle nod to the importance of Catholicism in the lives of many Irish people. Indeed, the people who live there are closely linked to the Church and to the area: the speaker calls them, simply, "Kiltartan's poor." The parallelism thus tells the reader something important about his "countrymen": they are closely linked to the land, to the Church, and to their own poverty.

The speaker's use of parallelism in lines 3-6 could also be labelled as anaphora, since the speaker starts the lines with similar words and phrases. The speaker returns to anaphora in lines 9-10, mixing in polysyndeton as well:

> Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
> Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,

The repetition of the word "nor" is emphatic and forceful. It underlines the strangeness of the speaker's motivations: none of the things that usually lead someone to fight in a war matter to him, and he emphasizes that point heavily through polysyndeton.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-6
- Lines 9-10
- Line 13
- Lines 14-15
- Line 16

CAESURA

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" contains just four caesuras. The most important of them fall in lines 13 and 16. In those lines, the speaker uses caesura to express his careful deliberations, the way he measures the good and bad parts of his life against each other. For instance, take a look at the caesura in line 13:

> I balanced all, brought all to mind,

There are four syllables before the caesura and four syllables after: the caesura neatly divides the line into two, metrically even, halves. In this way, the caesura quietly echoes the "balance" that the speaker is describing. It makes the reader feel like the speaker has been careful and judicious as he has weighed the value of his own life; that care is evident in the structure of the line itself.

A similar caesura appears in the poem's final line:

> In balance with this life, this death.

The speaker is measuring the value of his life against the pleasure he feels flying. He finds that his life is more or less meaningless—and that therefore he might as well indulge in the dangerous pleasure of flying. Once again, the caesura in the line emphasizes the care with which the speaker balances "life" against "death." The caesura helps make the speaker's decision to keep flying seem reasonable—even though it leads to his death.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** ", "
- **Line 10:** ", "

- **Line 13:** “, ”
- **Line 16:** “, ”

CHIASMUS

The poem ends with a striking set of repetitive lines. The final four lines are an elaborate example of the device chiasmus, following an *ABCCBA* pattern:

> I balanced all, brought all to mind,
> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind
> In balance with this life, this death.

Broken down, that pattern looks like this:

- *A*: "I balanced all"
- *B*: "The years to come"
- *C*: "waste of breath"
- *C*: "waste of breath"
- *B*: "the years behind"
- *A*: "In balance with this life

In these lines, the speaker describes measuring his life—the good and bad parts of it. He is careful and conscientious. He “balance[s]” everything, and comes to a conclusion that—to him—seems logical: his life is meaningless, so he may as well pursue the dangerous “delight” of flying as a fighter pilot. The carefully balanced repeated phrases, falling in a perfect *ABCCBA* pattern, mimic this balanced thinking. Just as the speaker carefully weighs good against bad, so too are his phrases are carefully weighed against each other.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** “I balanced all, brought all to mind, / The years to come seemed waste of breath, / A waste of breath the years behind / In balance with this life, this death.”

VOCABULARY

Fate (Line 1) - Death. The speaker is saying that he will die while flying an airplane in the war.

Guard (Line 4) - Fight for or on behalf of.

Kiltartan Cross (Line 5) - This refers to the region of County Galway on the southwest coast of Ireland. Specifically, Kiltartan Cross is a medieval Catholic church.

Kiltartan's Poor (Line 6) - The poor people who live in the region near the Kiltartan Church in County Galway, Ireland.

End (Line 7) - Outcome; the resolution of the war.

Bade (Line 9) - Encouraged or forced the speaker to fight.

Public Men (Line 10) - Politicians or other public figures.

Tumult (Line 12) - Chaos or confusion. Here, the speaker is referring specifically to dogfights between enemy fighter planes.

Balanced (Line 13, Line 16) - Compared or measured; weighed the good and the bad. In other words, the speaker takes stock of his life and considers all the different aspects of his past, present, and future.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

“An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” is an elegy. It memorializes the life of an unnamed “Irish Airman,” who predicts his own death in combat. Though the poem itself doesn't identify the airman, it was written to memorialize the death of Major Robert Gregory, an Irish pilot—and the son of one of W.B. Yeats's personal friends—who died in Italy during the war.

Elegies don't have a set form: there's no specific meter or rhyme scheme that elegies are supposed to use. So Yeats invents his own form for “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death.” The poem is a single 16-line stanza, and it is written in four rhyming quatrains. Its meter is iambic tetrameter. The poem is thus fairly traditional. Although it was written during a time of heady poetic innovation, it maintains an allegiance to traditional poetic forms. This helps to give the poem a timeless feel—even though it is about a specific time and place.

Although elegies don't follow a set form, they do often have a standard narrative. Elegies tend to start with mourning—their speakers are in deep grief for the death of someone important. And they move from that grief toward consolation: by the end of the poem, the speaker has often found a reason to be hopeful again. In many elegies, like Milton's “Lycidas,” this consolation is religious: the speaker remembers that the person he or she loved and lost will enjoy a better life in heaven.

In contrast, “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” lacks this traditional form of consolation. The speaker never says, for instance, that he hopes for a better life in heaven. If there is any consolation at all, it comes in the “lonely impulse of delight” the speaker feels as he flies his plane. In other words, the very thing that brings him consolation is the thing that will kill him. The poem thus breaks with the traditions of the elegy form in multiple ways. First, the speaker elegizes himself—he's both the speaker *and* the person whom the speaker grieves. And second, the poem never arrives at a strong consolation or a satisfying compensation for the speaker's death.

METER

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is written in iambic tetrameter. Iambic tetrameter has a "da DUM" rhythm, with four feet per line. Readers can hear this steady rhythm in the poem's first line:

I know | that I | shall meet | my fate

The poem follows this meter carefully. It contains few metrical substitutions, and those few substitutions don't upset the poem's rhythm. This in itself is notable. Even though the speaker is describing something which might be very upsetting—his own death—he remains calm and confident, effortlessly controlling the meter for 16 lines. The speaker's sense of control and resolution is thus evident in the poem's meter.

The poem's use of iambic tetrameter also echoes some of the poem's themes. Traditionally, poets writing in English use iambic pentameter for poems about war and heroism. By contrast, they use iambic tetrameter for lighter, less serious poems. Yeats's decision to write the poem in iambic tetrameter (rather than pentameter) thus reflects and echoes the speaker's own relationship to heroism—and to the traditions of war poetry. The speaker doesn't see himself as a hero and doesn't celebrate his own bravery—and neither does the poem. By using iambic tetrameter, then, the poem quietly signals its resistance to the way that poets typically write about war, and the speaker quietly emphasizes his resistance to being labeled a hero.

RHYME SCHEME

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is written in a single 16-line stanza. That stanza can be divided into four quatrains, each of which follows the same basic rhyme scheme:

ABAB

The poem uses simple, direct rhymes: with the exception of "above" in line 2, "before" in line 8, "delight" in line 11, and "behind" in line 16, all of its rhyme words are one syllable. And the poem's rhymes are all perfect rhymes—the speaker never uses weaker forms of rhyme, like slant rhyme. So the poem's rhyme scheme suggests something important about the speaker: even though he is facing death, he is calm and composed, perfectly in control of his poem. The skill and ease of the poem's rhymes suggest that the speaker isn't particularly afraid of death—he isn't troubled by the knowledge that he will die in battle. The reader can hear this confidence in the poem's final rhyme, between "breath" and "death":

> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind
> In balance with this life, this death.

The speaker is delving into some tough material here: he not only acknowledges that he will die, but he also admits that his own life seems meaningless to him. The rhyme links the two ideas together more closely, suggesting that he doesn't mind "this death" because his past and future are a "waste of breath." But despite all that, his rhymes remain calm, assured, and straightforward. The poem's rhyme scheme is unruffled by the complex and difficult subjects the poem addresses. Instead, it reflects the speaker's confidence—and perhaps more importantly, the indifference he feels as he confronts his own death.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is an Irish fighter pilot in World War I. The poem is based on the life and death of a real pilot, Major Robert Gregory, who flew with the British Air Force and died during World War I. Gregory was the son of one Yeats's friends and the poem was written as an elegy for him, which is why this guide uses masculine pronouns to refer to the speaker. However, the poem itself doesn't name Gregory or any of the specific details surrounding his life and death.

Instead, the poem's speaker is anonymous. He is defined not by his family or his personal history. Instead, the poem focuses on his relationship to the place where he's from—County Galway, on Ireland's west coast—and the "poor" people who live there. He seems to identify strongly as an Irishman, and so he doesn't love his role as a fighter pilot, fighting in a war on behalf of England—the country that, at the time the poem was written, ruled Ireland in an oppressive fashion. He feels sure the war won't improve the lives of his countrymen. Indeed, he regards his own life as meaningless and devoid of pleasure. As a result, the speaker is pessimistic, resigned to his fate—and critical of the war he fights in.

SETTING

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is set during World War I, a major conflict in Europe that lasted from 1914-1919. The poem is not specific about exactly when or where it happens. One might imagine the speaker as a new recruit, meditating on the dangers ahead of him, or as an experienced pilot, stationed at the front.

Instead of focusing on the details of the war—and the speaker's place in it—the poem reserves its most telling details to describe the place the speaker is from. He describes himself as an Irishman, from "Kiltartan Cross"—a poor, rural region on the west coast of Ireland. At the heart of the poem, then, is an irony: the speaker is an Irish pilot fighting on behalf of the British—the country which ruled Ireland at the time the poem

was written, often in a repressive fashion. The poem focuses on this tension because, for the speaker, Britain's oppression of his poor Irish countrymen is more important than the particular details of where he's stationed or even who he's fighting against. As he announces in line 7, no "likely end" of the war will improve—or worsen—the lives of his countrymen: the war itself is irrelevant to him and to them.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" was written at the height of a literary movement called *modernism*. Modernism was a response to rapid changes in European and American society at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th: the sudden shift to an economy organized around urban industry instead of agriculture. The modernists responded to these societal changes by trying to develop new literary forms—literary forms capable of capturing such transformations.

Yeats had a complicated relationship with the modernists. Though he is often considered a modernist—and was championed by key figures in the movement, like Ezra Pound—he remained invested in traditional poetic techniques, like meter and rhyme. "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is a good example of this fraught relationship with modernism. The poem is an elegy: it was written in memory of Major Robert Gregory, an Irish fighter pilot and the son of Lady Gregory, a close friend of W.B. Yeats. (Indeed, Yeats wrote several poems memorializing Robert Gregory's death). The poem refuses many of the conventions and standards of the elegy—a move that aligns it with modernism and modernist experiments with new forms and genres. At the same time, however, the poem is written in rhyming iambic tetrameter quatrains, a conventional form. The poem thus has complicated literary commitments: at once innovative and conservative, modern and traditional.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" was written in 1918—though Yeats waited to publish it until after World War I ended in 1919. He was afraid the poem was too critical of the war—perhaps rightly so: the poem offers a sharp critique of the way Britain uses Irish soldiers to fight its wars, while oppressing them at home.

World War I was a major conflict that lasted from 1914-1919. During the war, European powers like Britain and France fought against Germany and its allies. Though the war began with optimism and enthusiasm on both sides, it quickly ground into a brutal stalemate. It was the first truly modern war, and involved casualties on a level never before seen. At major battles like Verdun, hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides lost their lives. Both sides used new technologies—like airplanes and mustard gas—to terrorize their enemies. The war was so brutal that it caused many people to question the value and integrity of Western civilization.

Irish soldiers fought in World War I on the side of the British, but at the time the war was fought, England governed Ireland as a colony—and had done so since the 17th century. For many Irish people—in particular Irish Catholics—British rule was violent and oppressive. And for many Irish soldiers, it was difficult to see how the conflicts at the heart of the First World War related to their plight: the poverty and oppression they endured at home. For the speaker of the poem, that oppression is so severe that it makes his life—and his death—feel meaningless.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- W.B. Yeats Reads "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" — The poet recites "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AX3PS4bvL78)
- W. B. Yeats's Biography — A detailed biography of Yeats from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)
- Blake Morrison on "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." — The contemporary Irish poet Blake Morrison reflects on "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." (https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/my-favourite-wb-yeats-poem-blake-morrison-on-an-irish-airman-foresees-his-death-1.2243116)
- Background Info — Connie Ruzich provides detailed background on "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." (https://behindtheirlines.blogspot.com/2018/01/an-irish-airman.html)
- Major Robert Gregory — An article on the life of Major Robert Gregory, the Irish pilot memorialized by W.B. Yeats in "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." (https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/major-robert-gregory-and-the-irish-air-aces-of-1917-18/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Wild Swans at Coole

- When You Are Old

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Altman, Toby. "*An Irish Airman Foresees his Death*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 May 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Altman, Toby. "*An Irish Airman Foresees his Death*." LitCharts LLC, May 8, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-butler-yeats/an-irish-airman-foresees-his-death.