

## **An Irish Airman foresees his Death**

**A Poem by: William Butler Yeats**

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William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was born in Dublin, and educated in London and in Dublin. Throughout his life he had a profound sense of the history and tradition of Ireland, first expressed in his early poetry, which celebrates Irish folklore and myth. His first volume of verse appeared in 1887, but in his earlier period his dramatic production outweighed his poetry both in bulk and in import. Together with Lady Gregory he founded the Irish theater, which was to become the Abbey Theater, and served as its chief playwright until the movement was joined by John Synge. His plays usually treat Irish legends; they also reflect his fascination with mysticism and spiritualism.

After 1910, Yeats' dramatic art took a sharp turn toward a highly poetical, static, and esoteric style. Yeats is one of the few writers whose greatest works were written after the award of the Nobel Prize.

His recurrent themes are the contrast of art and life, masks, cyclical theories of life, and the ideal of beauty and ceremony contrasting with the hubbub of modern life.

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 man, 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, his death.

### **Commentary**

The airman in the poem is the pilot Major Robert Gregory, an Irish airman and a friend of Yeats, who was killed in Italy in 1918.

The pilot, of whom Yeats writes as in the first person, is convinced that the flight he is about to take will be his last, and he thinks of why he has chosen to fly. He did that on his own because of some powerful, internal "impulse" he felt, no other reason. He made his decision on the basis that his life is a waste of time, and can see nothing to convince him that his life to come will do any better.

Our speaker is a very special Irish airman, so, he has the power to foresee his own death. In a war as fierce as World War I, being able to expect one's own death in battle wasn't exactly that hard to do. But the airman is not too scared about it, which seems a little strange to us.

This lack of fear is because he seems to think he's made the right decision. A glorious death in the air seems a lot better when balanced against his wasted youth and an equally wasteful future.

The speaker says he knows that he will be killed while he is flying in his fighter among the clouds. He is fighting for the sake of England which he does not like because he is an Irish, and he does not hate the people he is fighting. The airman belongs to Ireland and to the poor country people and this war does not concern them at all.

The poem beautifully controlled and with alternate lines rhyming, sets forth the futility of war and disavows the idea of patriotism, since the airman is moved to fly by "A lonely impulse of delight". The poem thus captures the impetuosity of youth which cannot wait for the future and sees the past as something that has disappeared; life is the challenge of the present. There is universality about the poem; the language is terse, simple and direct, the fine balance of the poem is reflected in the balance of choice which is so carefully weighed by the airman himself. This balance is dependent upon running antitheses-hate, love, years to come, years behind, life, death- this gives the poem a cynical overtone condemning war. The repetition is a clever way of echoing the monotony of life until one accepts a challenge.

### **Theme**

This poem is considered as an anti-war poem, it reflects the bad effects of the wars on people and societies.