

Poetryclass Fresh Ideas for Learning from the Poetry Society

An Irish Airman Foresees his Death

By Jane Anderson

2015 is the 150th anniversary of the birth of poet and playwright W.B. Yeats. Yeats was born in Ireland but spent the first sixteen years of his life in England, only returning to his native Sligo for holidays. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923.

These activities enable pupils to examine a poem he wrote in response to the death of a friend's son during the First World War, and explore his attitude to writing about war.

Materials

- Printed copies of 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' cut into single lines and mixed up (one between two for the whole class) – see page 4
- Complete copies of 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' and 'On Being Asked for a War Poem' – see page 5
- A comic strip grid of ten squares for each pupil – see page 6

Pre-reading activities

Display the poem's title: 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death'. Ask pupils to discuss what this title suggests about the content, ideas and form of the poem.

As a class, brainstorm titles and ideas associated with WWI poems. Split the class into pairs and ask each

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Topics at a glance

- War poetry
- Descriptive language
- Imagery

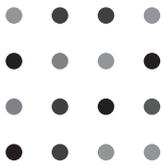


W.B. Yeats

pair to discuss what they think the point of writing war poetry is. For a starting point you could use W.H. Auden's line "poetry makes nothing happen" from his poem 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'.

Context: Aerial Combat

Display a picture of a WW1 plane (<http://bit.ly/1GJzAsV>) and remind the class that planes were a relatively new invention when the poem is set. If your class read *Private Peaceful* by Michael Morpurgo at primary school you can remind them of the depiction of planes in that book. Ask pupils what it would have been like to fly in a WWI plane.



You may want to refer to the writings of Cecil Lewis, who was a pilot during WWI. His obituary (<http://ind.pn/1esip47>) has some useful quotes about the experience of flying:

We who fly do so for the love of flying...
You can't get that feeling in anything else, that feeling of leaving the earth, of going to heaven and really lifting yourself up off this flat dish of earth into the three dimensions of God.

Context: Britain and Ireland

During WWI Ireland was governed by the United Kingdom, meaning Irish men fought as part of the British forces. However, at the same time, Ireland was struggling to become independent from the United Kingdom. In 1916 there was an uprising in Dublin against the British government. There were many casualties and many of the rebels were executed for their involvement.

Yeats tried to stay out of making public political points and waited until the war was over to publish this poem. *Withhold* the information that the poem was written for the son of a friend who was killed in a 'friendly fire' incident.

Examining form

Hand out the mixed up version of the poem to pairs. Display the title again. Tell the class that they have a sixteen-line poem. Their task is to re-organise it.

Hints: (You may want to reveal these at the beginning or during the task depending on the ability of your class)

- The poem's first line is a statement
- Ideas are organised over two consecutive lines
- Look at first words of lines or repeated words, or ideas that are mirrored

After five minutes or so explain that Yeats wrote this poem with a regular rhyme scheme: *abab*. Ask pupils to use this information to turn make sure their lines



Sopwith Camel WWI fighter plane.

are arranged in quatrains (stanzas made up of four lines). There are four in the poem. Give them time put the *whole* poem together.

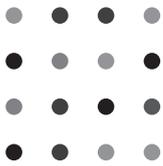
Hand out complete copies of the full poem. Ask pairs to compare their order with the complete poem. Stress that there is no right or wrong answer. How have they used the same material to create a different effect? Now they can see Yeats's version what effect do they think he was trying to create? This is what they are going to examine.

Close reading

Ask pupils to read the poem out loud individually or in small groups and task them with examining one or more of the following elements.

Rhythm – What patterns can they feel as they read each line? What is the effect of this rhythm? Is it simple, complicated, hectic, calm, hysterical or matter of fact? Why might Yeats have used this? (There are four iambic tetrameters. This means each line is made up of four *iamb*s, consisting of a short syllable followed by a long syllable.)

Pronouns – Circle all the pronouns. Who is speaking? What impact does this have?



Rhyme – Which couplets do you find the most interesting? What impact does the rhyme have on the poem?

Now reveal that Yeats wrote this poem about the death of a friend's son who was killed by friendly fire. Ask pupils whether this makes them feel differently about the poem.

Comic strip activity

This activity will help your students get to grips with what can be a challenging poem. Hand out blank comic strips to the class (template on page 6). Ask them to visually represent the poem. Use the following set of guidelines:

- The comic should be no more than ten frames, but one of these can be a split frame
- Draw images to explain and illustrate the poem
- Use quotes from the poem, in speech and thought bubbles to support the images
- Include at least one close up of the pilot's face to show emotion
- All illustrations should be suggested from the poem, but they can include one wild card image, which might show a WW1 propaganda image to contrast with something in the poem, or a newspaper obituary of the pilot

Set up a gallery for pupils to compare their versions of the poem. The class could also compare their comic strips with the illustrated reading on BBC bitesize (<http://bbc.in/1n1ejT8>).



British wounded at Bernafay Wood, France, 19 July 1916, during the Battle of the Somme.

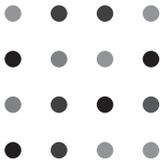
Attitude to War

Show the class Yeats's 'On Being Asked for a War Poem'. Give pupils some time to read it and then share their responses.

- What do you think about Yeats' attitude to war? Do you agree?
- What do you find interesting or unusual about the way Yeats writes about war in these two poems?

Extension activities

Ask pupils to write a poem, speech, story or news article about war. Why did they choose that medium? What effect did they intend it to have?



An Irish Airman Foresees his Death Examining form

Those that I guard I do not love;

✂

A waste of breath the years behind

✂

Those that I fight I do not hate,

✂

I balanced all, brought all to mind,

✂

Or leave them happier than before.

✂

My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,

✂

I know that I shall meet my fate,

✂

Somewhere among the clouds above;

✂

No likely end could bring them loss

✂

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,

✂

In balance with this life, this death.

✂

A lonely impulse of delight

✂

My country is Kiltartan Cross,

✂

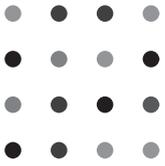
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,

✂

The years to come seemed waste of breath,

✂

Drove to this tumult in the clouds;



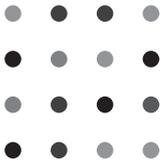
W. B. Yeats

An Irish Airman Foresees his Death

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.

On being asked for a War Poem

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night.



An Irish Airman Foresees his Death Comic strip activity
