

W.B. Yeats
An Irish airman forsee his death
More questions of a challenging nature!

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The Irish airman is not the poet himself. Indeed, the poem is probably a celebration of the death of Major Robert Gregory, a personal friend of the poet and the only child of Yeats's patron, Lady Augusta Gregory. All in all, Yeats wrote no less than four poems to commemorate Major Gregory's death, two of them being published in his anthology *The Wild Swans at Coole* -- "Irish airman forsee his death" being one of them.

Because the poet is not talking about himself, he is able to ponder the death of his friend and the reasons for his joining the air force in the first place. This also enables him to speak about the very nature of warfare itself. His conclusion is that war achieves nothing that is useful. The poor -- encapsulated by "Kiltartan's poor" -- neither gain nor lose by warfare. War is therefore purely a thing of the state.

Accepting that his friend had that same belief, why then would he have enlisted to fight? The answer appears to have been the personal excitement of it all, the exhilaration of flying high up in the clouds and the adrenaline rush of participating in aerial dogfights. Your attention should focus on the final four lines of this poem containing a chiasmus which clearly explains the intellectual decision for the pilot's decision.

1. "Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds."
 - What does one call the law which compels people to join the army and fight? (1)
 - Contrast the "law" with the "duty" which might have made the airman join the air-force. (4)
 - How could the "public man" or the "cheering crowds" have forced the airman to fight? (4)

2. "A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds."
 - What is an "impulse"? (2)
 - Why should this impulse have been "lonely"? (4)
 - Explain how it was possible that this "impulse" could have been one of "delight". (4)

3. The poet speaks only of the "tumult in the clouds" but makes no mention of the great tumult on the land, something that has definitely been remembered as a feature of this particular war.
 - Why does he refer only to this "tumult in the clouds" while completely ignoring the other side of the war? (4)

4. "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."
 - What is a chiasmus? (4)
 - Explain the chiasmus in these four lines. (4)
 - How does this use of a chiasmus reinforce the idea that the airman had joined the air-force for purely intellectual reasons? (4)

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