Unseen Poetry – An Introduction

In this section, worth 20 marks, you will be asked questions on a poem you have probably never seen before. Remember, the poem has been carefully chosen to be accessible to Leaving Cert students so the chances are that you will understand it fairly easily if you approach it calmly and sensibly.

It is worth remembering the unseen poem is worth **five per cent** of your English exam. That could easily mean the difference between an A or a B.

Leave the unseen poem until last, and spend about twenty minutes on it. Read the poem three times before attempting the questions. It can be helpful to read the questions after the first reading, as they can set you on the right path or show you where you should focus your attention.

When you are reading the poem, consider the following:

- **Introduction** – Is there an introduction to the poem? If there is, be sure to read it. It is there for a reason. If none is needed, none is given.

- **Title** – Does the title tell you anything about the theme of the poem? Does it set up expectations which are perhaps fulfilled or shattered as you read on? The title of the poem is very important and the poet spent quite some time choosing it, so don’t ignore it.

- **Theme** – What is the main message of the poem? Love is a very common theme, as are war, childhood, memories, and the beauty of nature.

- **Tone** – the feelings and attitude of the poet towards the subject of the poem. Think of the tone of voice the poet would use if reading this poem aloud. Would the tone change as the poem progresses? Would some parts be read in a loud, excited voice and some in a quieter manner? The tone can change several times throughout the poem. If you notice changes as you are reading through it, jot them down on the page beside the relevant lines in the poem.

- **Rhythm** - Is the pace of the poem fast or slow? Does this tell us anything about the theme or the tone? (A slow rhythm is often associated with sadness.) What effect does the rhythm have? Does the rhythm vary? If so, why? Poems can have exciting
moments in between calm, reflective ones. Look at the punctuation. Is there end line punctuation? That can slow the rhythm of the poem. Is there enjambment/run-on lines? That can speed up the rhythm of the poem. A full stop at the end of the poem can suggest closure and can tell us that the poet has come to some sort of understanding/resolution of the issue.

- **Rhyme scheme** – Is there a rhyme scheme? If so, what effect does it have on the poem? For example, a poem written in rhyming couplets has a definite rhythm, and single ideas are often contained within a couplet. A poet may use a rhyming couplet at the end of the poem in order to focus our attention on the main message of the poem or to make the lines in the couplet stand out. If there is no rhyme scheme, ask yourself why not? Or does the poem only contain full rhyme at the end? If so, this may indicate closure or may link the lines/ideas in our minds.

- **Tenses** - Is the poem in the past, present or conditional tense, for example? Does the tense change? Does this indicate that the poet has reached a conclusion? Or does the switch to the present tense show that the poet has become deeply involved with the issue? Is something unresolved and is this shown by the use of the present or future tense in the poem?

- **Language – imagery, sounds etc.** - This is your opportunity to use those key literary terms. It is important that you do so. Start with sound: is there any alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia etc.? Remember, like drama, poetry is really meant to be read aloud and the sound is very important.

- **To whom is the poet speaking?** - Does the poet address the subject of the poem directly? This can create a sense of intimacy. Does the poet address the reader directly? Use of the word ‘we’ can make the reader feel connected with the poet. Does the poet speak in the poem or does he assume another persona? If so, why?

- **Your response to the poem** – did you like it? Why? Why not? You must explain yourself fully here. Don’t worry if you didn’t understand every aspect of the poem. The question(s) will not require you to do so. And remember, your response is valid if you can support it with quotation from or reference to the poem.

**NB** A common mistake is for students to point out features of style but not to explain the effect they have on the poem. Every time you point out a feature of style, use a verb to say what effect it has: ‘The soft ‘l’ and ‘s’ sounds in the alliterative ‘I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore’ add to the peaceful atmosphere of the poem.’
1. (a) In the above poem Seamus Heaney recommends driving ‘all round the peninsula’. Based on your reading of the poem, explain why you think the poet recommends undertaking such a journey.

**Note:**
This question allows you free rein to discuss your own interpretation so do not be afraid to do so. As it is a ten mark question, you should aim to have two well-developed reasons for undertaking the journey. If you have more, you can discuss them, of course, but keep an eye on the timing.

It is worth noting that Seamus Heaney was one of the prescribed poets the year this poem appeared so many students would have had an insight into his connection with nature etc.

**Plan:**
- When you feel inarticulate or drained, driving in a place where words are not needed is helpful
- The beauty of the landscape will provide you with food for thought

**Sample Answer:**
Seamus Heaney recommends driving ‘all around the peninsula’ because it is a place which will revive tired spirits and provide food for thought.

In the opening line, Heaney tells us that when you are feeling inarticulate, you should ‘just drive / For a day all round the peninsula’. He could be referring to lack of poetic inspiration here, or simply feeling drained and quiet. Words will not be needed because this is a place where you can get in touch with nature once again in a ‘land without marks’. The focus here is on the landscape and seascape. The land has no need for words but it can speak to you nonetheless. From the ‘sky as tall as over a runway’ to the horizons which ‘drink down sea and hill’ you will be swept away by the limitless beauty of this place.
Heaney goes on to say that if you absorb the beauty of everything from the ‘glazed foreshore and silhouetted log’ to the mysterious islands ‘riding themselves out into the fog’ you will have food for thought and will be able to recall it when you are ‘in the dark again’. The memory of this place will sustain you even when you cannot see it any more. Words will still not be needed but by grounding yourself in the natural world you will have a greater understanding and appreciation of its beauty and will be better equipped to cope with life and ‘uncode all landscapes’.

(ii) Chose two images from the poem that appeal to you and explain your choice.

Note:
It is important to copy out the images you have selected so the examiner knows what you are talking about.

Plan:
- Islands riding themselves... mysterious, playful, imaginative
- At dusk.... Personification adds to drama, power of nature over man

Sample Answer:

The first image I have chosen is in third stanza where Heaney describes the islands ‘riding themselves out into the fog’. This appealed to me as I found it strikingly unusual and mysterious. I could see quite clearly, in my mind’s eye, distant islands appearing to move into the mist as the water surged around them. They need no ship to sail off into the fog but are instead seem to be ‘riding themselves’ as they vanish from sight. This fuelled my imagination as I wondered what could lie beyond the fog and I imagined being on the end of the peninsula almost entirely surrounded by water and thus easily swept away by thoughts of sailing into the unknown. This seemed to me to be in keeping with a poem which I think centres on the idea of finding inspiration from allowing oneself to become immersed in the beauty of the natural world.

The second image which appealed to me is also connected to the idea of a journey and it is in the first stanza when Heaney says ‘The sky is tall as over a runway’ . The fact that a
runway is used for the purposes of comparison in this simile naturally made me think of flying off into that vast, open sky. Like the first image I chose, this one seemed to me to stress the idea of limitless possibilities that the peninsula suggests to the poet and, by extension, to the reader. I can easily see why this would be an ideal place to go if you felt that you had ‘nothing more to say’. The place that Heaney describes so evocatively would inspire even the most inarticulate among us.

2. Discuss the effectiveness of the poet’s use of language throughout this poem. Your answer should refer closely to the text.

Note:
The most important word in this question is ‘effectiveness’. If you discuss the language in the poem and point out features of style without saying whether or not you find them effective, you will get a low grade.

This answer is quite long but it is no harm to see what can be said on the subject.

Plan:
• Simplicity and directness of the opening lines engages the reader immediately
• Imagery evokes the mystery and inspiration that is to be found in this place
• Imagery becomes more vivid as the poem progresses
• The poem begins simply but ends with a more complex idea

Sample Answer:
The simplicity and directness of the opening lines of this poem engage the reader immediately. Heaney addresses us, the readers, and his message is clear. When you are feeling drained or quiet or merely searching for the right language in which to express yourself, a physical journey around this place can be the starting point for your linguistic journey. It is entirely appropriate that a poem based on the search for articulacy should begin in such a straightforward, uncomplicated manner. The instruction, ‘just drive/ For a day all round the peninsula’ is effective because it is down-to-earth and conversational and allows us to relate to the poet and his plight.

Make sure that each point you make is linked back to the question.
The imagery in the poem captures the essence of the mystery and inspiration that Heaney believes are to be found in immersing oneself in this landscape. An example of this is in third stanza where Heaney describes the islands ‘riding themselves out into the fog’. As I read this line I could see quite clearly, in my mind’s eye, distant islands appearing to move into the mist as the water surged around them. They need no ship to sail off into the fog but are instead seem to be ‘riding themselves’ as they vanish from sight. It is easy to imagine being on the end of the peninsula almost entirely surrounded by water and thus easily swept away by thoughts of sailing into the unknown. An image which fuels the imagination in this way is entirely in keeping with the theme of the poem.

As Heaney describes the journey ‘all round the peninsula’, the imagery becomes – fittingly – more vivid. The breakers are ‘shredded into rags’ on the rocks: a most unusual idea which perfectly evokes the transition from a solid wave of blue water to patches of white foam. Similarly, the idea of the ploughed field which ‘swallows the whitewashed gable’ brings this landscape to life and reminds us that this is a place of constant change and movement where nothing has a chance to grow stale or tired. The imagery is a little dark in both of these examples: the word ‘shredded’ implies violent force and the dark earth swallowing up the house personifies the land in a slightly unsettling way. All of the imagery, however, is powerful and thought-provoking, which proves that this place is indeed inspirational.

Finally, Heaney brings the poem to a close by returning to the point from which he began. Just as the journey around the peninsula ends up where it started, so does the poem. He may still have ‘nothing to say’, but now at least he can recall the beauty of this place and the possibilities it offers. The extended metaphor of the journey ends perfectly here. It has been the key to the poet unlocking his thoughts and allowing him to express himself in richer language than in the opening stanza.
The Fist

The fist clenched round my heart
loosens a little, and I gasp
brightness; but it tightens
again. When have I ever not loved
the pain of love? But this has moved
past love to mania. This has the strong
clench of the madman, this is
gripping the ledge of unreason, before
plunging howling into the abyss.

Hold hard then, heart. This way at least you live.

Derek Walcott

1.(a) Walcott expresses powerful emotions in this poem. Choose one emotion present in the poem and briefly explain how it is conveyed. Make reference to the text in support of your answer. (10)

(b) Write a brief personal response to the final line of the poem.  

Hold hard then, heart. This way at least you live. 

Support your answer with reference to the poem. (10)

OR

2. Discuss the poet’s use of language in ‘The Fist’. Your answer should make lose reference to the text. (20)

Note: Part (a) asks you not just to name the emotion but to say how it is conveyed. This means discussing aspects of the poet’s style.
Sample answer to 1 (a)

It seems clear to me that the poet is afraid of the situation in which he finds himself. His fear is clear from the opening lines of the poem when he describes the pain of the love he feels as being like a fist gripping his heart. That immediately made me think that the poet feels that this emotion might actually kill him. He describes himself as gasping brightness, much as a drowning person might frantically suck in air when breaking to the surface. However, any relief is short lived and the fist ‘tightens again’. This is a terrifying image and shows me clearly how frightening this sort of intense love can be.

The second stanza gives us an even more startling insight into the poet’s state of mind. The vivid and horrifying image of love being something which could plunge the poet ‘howling into the abyss’ is a chilling one. He is holding onto ‘the ledge of unreason’, which implies that what lies beneath him is madness. The poet is on the very edge and if he cannot pull back, he will fall. This is quite a terrifying thought and the long vowel sound in the word ‘howling’ adds to the sense of fear. The enjambment in this stanza creates a sense of movement and adds to the idea that the poet’s emotions are hurtling out of control.

It is hardly surprising that the poet’s desire is to keep himself safe from this frightening prospect, which is why the steady rhythm and control of the last line seems to me to be a deliberate effort to wrest control from his emotions and stay on the side of reason. He addresses his heart directly: ‘Hold hard then, heart’, which I believe shows how desperate he is to avoid the horror that awaits if he gives in to the demands of love. It is almost as if addressing his heart as a separate entity will detach him somewhat from an emotion that threatens to overwhelm him.
Sample answer to 1 (b)
The first thing that struck me about the last line of the poem was that it stands alone, separate from the final stanza. I wondered if this was to emphasise the poet’s resolution to maintain a certain distance in his relationship and not to allow himself to be dragged down into ‘the abyss’ by an emotion that has ‘moved / past love to mania’.

I also noticed the rhythm of this line. It is written in iambic pentameter, and the regularity of it has a twofold effect. First it provides a clear and controlled ending to the poem and contrasts with the enjambment that makes the previous stanza so highly-charged and emotional. There is no rushing here, no sense of mania at all. Instead, there is order and calm. I thought that this was very fitting in that the poet has come to a definite resolution and has decided on his next course of action, which is to ‘hold hard’ and stay in control. The second effect of this rhythm is to mirror a regular, steady heartbeat. This seems to say that the poet’s heart is not racing or pounding with an overflow of emotion any longer.

Another thing I liked about this final line with its simple, monosyllabic words is the way the poet addresses his heart directly, as if it were a separate entity to himself. Earlier in the poem he speaks of it as ‘my heart’ but now it is ‘you’. Again, I wondered if this was the poet’s way of creating a distance between himself and a love that threatens to consume him.

I did feel, however, that there was something a little sad about this last line. Certainly, it is better that the poet not be pulled into an emotional maelstrom that will cause him great pain, but at the same time he appears to be saying that intense love can only be a painful thing. This seems a rather depressing message, and I would have preferred a more uplifting end to the poem.

2. Discuss the poet’s use of language in ‘The Fist’. Your answer
should make close reference to the text. (20)

**Note:** In the past, the 20 mark question has generally asked you to write a personal response to the poem. This year, however, you were asked to focus on the language in the poem. This is a good example of why you should always read the question carefully and never assume that the questions will follow the pattern of previous years.

When you are asked to discuss the language in a poem, you should try to imagine that you are reading the poem aloud. I realise this is a difficult thing to do in an exam, but remember that the sounds of a poem are very important. Is the language difficult or easy to understand? Is there assonance? Alliteration? Long vowel sounds? Most importantly, what is the effect of any features of style you have selected?

**Sample answer to 2**

The first thing that struck me about this poem was the relaxed, narrative style of the writing. Derek Walcott describes complex emotions in simple, colloquial language. In the opening stanza he tells of his fear and distress as intense love causes him great pain. He describes this in a way to which we can all relate by comparing love to a fist gripping his heart so tightly that he feels he cannot breathe.

The rhetorical question in this stanza engages us as readers and helps us to empathise with Walcott’s feelings. By asking if there has ever been a time he has not ‘loved / the pain of love’, the poet offers us a chance to reflect on the question from a personal perspective. The juxtaposition of the words ‘pain’ and ‘love’ make us think of the connection between the two emotions, just as the juxtaposition of the words ‘fist’ and ‘heart’ make us think of violence and love at the same time. This is most effective in conveying the hurt and anguish that the poet feels when he considers his emotional state.

The second stanza is very powerful because of the rather horrifying yet striking metaphor comparing love to ‘the strong / clench of the madman’. Love is neither gentle nor pleasant in this poem, but is something that has the potential to cause great harm. If the poet gives in to it, he will plunge ‘howling into the abyss’. The onomatopoeic word ‘howling’ with its long ‘ow’ sound effectively conveys the agony and the fear the poet sees in surrendering to the ‘mania’ of this type of love.

You must concentrate on the language of the poem rather than the theme. Focus on aspects of style and use poetic terminology.
The final line of the poem is effective because of its simplicity. The line stands alone, perhaps to symbolise the poet’s deliberate detachment from the maelstrom of emotion described in the previous stanzas. The alliterative and monosyllabic ‘Hold hard then heart’, emphasises the poet’s determination to remain steady and controlled despite the power of emotion that threatens to overwhelm him. The repeated ‘h’ sounds in the first, alliterative sentence mimic the exhalation of breath, perhaps showing that the poet can now breathe freely as he has made the decision to separate himself from the love that gripped him so strongly that even a temporary release allowed him to ‘gasp brightness’. However, the words ‘at least’ in the final sentence seem to indicate that the poet’s decision, while necessary, is not without its own pain. He may live, but is that enough?

The language in this short, deceptively simple poem powerfully conveys the pain love can cause and the poet’s determination to drag himself free of an emotion that has become ‘the clench of the madman’.

If you read quickly to get through a poem to what it means, you have missed the body of the poem.

M. H. Abrams
Back Yard

Shine on, O moon of summer.
Shine to the leaves of grass, catalpa and oak,
All silver under your rain tonight.

An Italian boy is sending songs to you tonight from an accordion.
A Polish boy is out with his best girl; they marry next month;
tonight they are throwing you kisses.

An old man next door is dreaming over a sheen
that sits in a cherry tree in his back yard.

The clocks say I must go—I stay here sitting on the back porch
drinking white thoughts you rain down.

Shine on, O moon,
Shake out more and more silver changes.

Carl Sandburg

1. (a) Do you like the world that the poet describes in this poem? Give reasons for your
answer supporting them by reference to the text. (10)
(b) Choose a line or two that you find particularly appealing and explain why. (10)

OR

2. Write a personal response to the poem ‘Back Yard’. (20)
Note: You are not expected to give a lengthy answer here. Two paragraphs would be quite sufficient. The marking scheme requires students to identify the ‘world’ of the poem and say why it does or does not appeal to them. My sample answers may be longer than you would be able to write in an exam situation, but it is no harm to see what can be said on the topic.

Plan:

1. World is exotic in many ways (plants, nationalities) but also familiar (nature, human nature)
2. Positive message, contemplative atmosphere & celebratory tone

I find the world the poet describes very appealing. The blend of the exotic and familiar, of the domestic and the wider world caught my attention from the start. The title ‘Back Yard’, suggests the poem is set in America, an idea which is picked up again when the poet says he is ‘sitting on the back porch’, but the domestic setting of the poem is familiar to us. The ‘catalpa’ may be unfamiliar to us, but cherry, oak and grass are not. The people may be from different nationalities: ‘an Italian boy’ and ‘a Polish boy’, but their actions transcend their nationalities. One is caught up in the playing of music, while the other is out with his girlfriend. The moon shines down on them just as it shines down on all people, regardless of age or nationality. The old man is lost in his dreams too, looking at the beauty of his cherry tree illuminated by the moon. The universality of the moonshine reminds us of the universality of human nature, and this makes the world of the poem very attractive and one to which I can easily relate.

Another aspect of the world of the poem which I really enjoyed was the atmosphere evoked throughout. We are drawn into a contemplative place where the characters’ actions appear to be paying homage to the moon. The accordion player is sending his songs to the moon, and the young couple are ‘throwing [the moon] kisses’. The old man is lost in thought as he looks at the moonlit cherry tree. Even the poet does not want to leave this beautiful scene. The world of the poem here is a place of celebration, contemplation and, I think, happiness. As such, it is a most attractive place.
(b) Choose a line or two that you find particularly appealing and explain why. (10)

The lines which I find particularly appealing are the final two:

Shine on, O moon,
Shake out more and more silver changes.

As in the rest of the poem, the poet addresses the moon directly, as if it were a living being. This creates a sense of intimacy and makes the atmosphere of the poem somehow comforting. There is a connection between the moon and the people in the poem, and their homage to the moon links them to one another. There is also something celebratory in the way the poet asks the moon to ‘Shine on’. He seems to revel in the beauty of the moonshine and in the mood it evokes in those who bathe in its light and he wants this feeling to continue.

The sounds in the last two lines also appealed to me. The ‘sh’ sounds in ‘Shine’ and ‘Shake’ and the ‘s’ and ‘ch’ sounds in ‘silver changes’ are gentle and quiet, almost as if the poet is whispering to the moon and does not want to break the magic of the moment by speaking too loudly. The broad vowel sounds slow down the movement of the line, which I think is in keeping with the overall mood of contemplation and dreaming.

Finally, I was very taken with the expression ‘silver changes’. This seemed to me to have a double meaning. First, it made me think of the moon as almost dropping treasure on those below: ‘silver changes’ reminded me of silver coins, or change being shaken from a pocket or a purse. It also made me imagine the moon as a silver coin in the sky. Second, it made me reflect on the passing of time, and the fact that although the moon remains constant, those beneath it change in that they grow old and die. I thought of the contrast between the old man and the boys mentioned earlier in the poem. They are living their dream; he is left only with the memories of his.

These may be short lines, but they had a powerful effect on me nonetheless.
The poet, Rosita Boland, reflects on the tragedy of a war-torn region in our world.

BUTTERFLIES
In Bosnia, there are landmines
Decorated with butterflies
And left on the grassy pathways
Of rural villages.

The children come, quivering down
Familiar lanes and fields.
Hands outstretched, they reach triumphant
For these bright, elusive insects -
Themselves becoming winged in the act.
Gaudy and ephemeral.

1. Write a short response to the above poem, highlighting the impact it makes on you.

This poem affected me strongly. The title, ‘Butterflies’, suggests something beautiful and delicate and lovely, but that expectation was blown away once I read on.

The language is simple and the tone of the poem is almost chatty in the first stanza. It is as if Boland wants to stress the difference between normality and the grotesque reality for the children in Bosnia during the war. The image of the landmines decorated with butterflies is a horrific one. The juxtaposition of fragile beauty and brutal violence is jarring and I found it very disturbing. I was also struck by the emphasis on the innocence of the victims. Of course, no victim of a landmine deserves their fate, but the mention of ‘grassy pathways’ and ‘rural villages’ conjures up an image of a place that should be far removed from the battlefield, and yet the war has been brought even to
this idyllic place.

The introduction of the children in the second stanza adds to this impression. They are described as ‘quivering’ - a word which both suggests the gentle movement of butterflies’ wings in the breeze and, at the same time, fear or shaking. Yet, in this case, it is the reader who is quivering in horrified anticipation of what must come. I felt oddly helpless as I read of the children’s ‘Hands outstretched’, reaching unwittingly for something that would bring them – not the joy they had anticipated – but a violent, bloody death. The link between the children and the butterflies is continued when Boland describes the children becoming ‘winged’ and ‘ephemeral’. The image of the children’s bodies flying through the air and the emphasis on the shortness of their lives moved me a great deal.

Boland’s understatement in this poem added to the powerful impact it had on me. Her seemingly casual mention of the ‘familiar lanes and fields’ was poignant, as it made me think of the fact that the children had lived here all their lives and undoubtedly felt happy and safe in their home place. Yet the lurking menace of the landmines hangs over them from the first line of the poem.

This poem, while not comfortable reading, is one which I found both haunting and sobering. It seems to me to be a fitting tribute to innocent children everywhere who – much like the baby in Eavan Boland’s ‘Child of Our Times’ - are the victims of a violent adult world.
John Montague – A Brief Biography

The son of Irish Catholics, poet John Montague was actually born in Brooklyn, shortly after his parents, who had been involved in Ireland’s post-1916 national strife, immigrated to the U.S. In New York the family struggled through the Depression, and in 1933 Montague and his two brothers were sent back to Ireland. Montague was raised by two aunts on the family farm and educated at the seminary of Saint Patrick’s College in Armagh. He attended University College Dublin, where he published his first poems. In 1953 Montague enrolled at Yale University on a Fulbright Fellowship. After time at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and the University of California, Berkeley, as well as back in Dublin, Montague moved to Paris, where he was the Paris correspondent for The Irish Times and became close friends with playwright Samuel Beckett. He eventually returned to Ireland, settling in Cork.

Montague’s poems often find their shape in extended sequences that engage themes of travel and exile, national identity and personal loss. As Edna Longley noted in the Times Literary Supplement: “more than any poet of his generation he opened up channels between the Irish and English tradition, between regional and cosmopolitan allegiances, between Ulster and Irish perspectives.”

Montague’s honors include the American Ireland Fund Literary Award, The Irish-American Cultural Institute’s Award for Literature, the Marten Toonder Award, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and an honorary doctorate from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Montague has taught at the University of Albany, where he was chosen as the first Ireland Chair of Poetry, and at University College Cork. He shares his time between homes in Cork and Nice.

This biography has been edited, without the author’s consent, from the website http://www.poetryfoundation.org
My father, the least happy man I have known. His face retained the pallor of those who work underground: the lost years in Brooklyn listening to a subway shudder the earth.

But a traditional Irishman who (released from his grille in the Clark St. I.R.T) drank neat whiskey until he reached the only element he felt at home in any longer: brute oblivion.

And he picked himself up, most mornings, to march down the street extending his smile to all sides of the good, (all-white) neighbourhood belled by St. Teresa’s church.

When he came back we walked together across fields of Garvaghey to see hawthorn on the summer hedges, as though he had never left; a bend of the road which still sheltered primroses. But we
did not smile in
the shared complicity
of a dream, for when
weary Odysseus returns
Telemachus should leave.

Often as I descend
into subway or underground
I see his bald head behind
the bars of the small booth;
the mark of an old car
accident beating on his
ghostly forehead.

**Background**

John Montague's parents left Ireland in the 1920s, hoping to find wealth and success in America. The reality was very different to the dream and the family came to live in the poor area of Brooklyn, New York. In 1929, after a difficult labour, John was born. His parents, unhappy in their marriage and living in poverty, sent the four year old James back to Co. Tyrone to live with two maiden aunts. His brothers were sent to live with their grandmother. Montague’s mother returned to Ireland when he was seven, but Montague remained with his aunts. In a 2010 interview on RTE radio, he explained the situation as follows: ‘I think there was a subtle kind of psychological war fare going on between the aunts who wanted to keep me....and my mother who didn’t have enough money to reclaim me’.

James Montague, the poet’s father, remained in Brooklyn for the next twenty years before retiring and returning to Garvaghey.
Summary and analysis:

Title:

The title of the poem immediately brings to mind images of imprisonment, sadness and frustration. The poet's father worked in booth in the underground station in Brooklyn, separated from the public by an iron grille which resembled a cage. He was trapped in his job, in misery, in poverty and in alcoholism. His confinement was both physical and mental.

Stanza One:

The poem opens conversationally, almost as if the poet is discussing his father with someone who didn't know him but has enquired about him. He answers the imagined question bluntly and simply, "My father was the least happy / man I have ever known. This is a very negative statement and must have been sad for the poet to admit. He goes on to explain that his father never lost the paleness that came of working underground in the New York subway system for so many years. It was as if he was in prison, missing out on life in the outside world, a fact which is reinforced by the description of the "lost years". They were also years in which James Montague was lost to his son. In a newspaper interview Montague says of his father: 'He returned to Ireland in 1952, so that was 18 years in between I didn't see him, so I was inclined afterwards to be kind to him I think. One time when I was working away at my typewriter, in those later years, he came into the room to me, and he said, “I frittered away all my chances, John. All my chances”.

The onomatopoeic ‘shudder’ in line 7 refers to the sound of the trains on the lines, shaking the ground as they pass. However, the word ‘shudder’ also brings to mind revulsion and horror.

Stanza Two:

The word "But" at the beginning of this stanza seems to offer some hope that all may not have been as bad as the picture painted in the first stanza. This hope is not realised, however. The poet's father is described as a 'traditional Irishman', in other words a white Catholic with a fondness for drink. Every day he was 'released from his grille' like an animal. This animal imagery, introduced in the title, is reinforced here and again in line 14 where the father is described as drinking himself into 'brute oblivion.' The only way the poet's father can find happiness is to remove himself completely from the misery of his existence. He has no happy home and his dreams have come to nothing so he drinks to escape the frustration and isolation he feels in his daily life. Ironically, he has created another cage for himself by doing this. His body becomes a cage too, one which he has created for himself.
Stanza Three:
The opening of the third stanza again raises our hopes for a moment. The words, "And yet" make us wonder if there is still a chance of happiness for the poet's father. We soon learn that there is not. There seems to be something sarcastic in the use of the words 'traditional Irishman'. The stereotype of the Irish is that they are frequently drunk and this certainly seems to have been true of Montague's father who could manage to pull himself together enough to go to work 'most mornings.' The picture of his hung-over father 'extending his smile' to his neighbours in the all-white, Catholic neighbourhood is an interesting one. Did James Montague feel superior to those who were neither white nor Catholic? There is an implication that he was particular about the company he kept, which is ironic, considering his own situation.

This stanza can be read in a serious way, imagining the poet admiring his father's resilience in getting up each morning and facing the world. In a 1988 *Irish University Review* interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Montague says that his 'poor old battered father' was 'an intensely believing Catholic' and that this faith gave him great comfort.

Stanzas Four and Five:
These stanzas run together as Montague tells of his father's return to Tyrone after more twenty years in America. The poet's father wants to walk the 'fields of Garvaghey / to see hawthorn on the summer / hedges, as though / he had never left' but of course it is a dream that cannot be realised. The run-on lines here capture the sense of ease and freedom as father and son walk together. Although James Montague may not wish to acknowledge the years that he spent in Brooklyn, his son cannot smile with him, cannot recapture lost time. The father who comes back to his home place is not someone he knows now, not someone who played any significant part in his upbringing. They cannot 'smile in the shared complicity / of a dream'. The flowers may grow in the same places on the same road but little else remains unchanged in the twenty years since the poet's father left Tyrone. The time that has passed cannot be recaptured. Montague refers to the story of Odysseus who spent years away from home, fighting in the Trojan war. When he returned, it was time for his grown son, Telemachus, to leave home. The poet is an adult now and is ready to move on with his life. His father is too late.
Stanza Six:

In this final stanza, the poet speaks of how he often thinks of his father when he travels on the subway or the underground. He imagines that he can see his father's bald head, marked by the scar of a car accident, trapped behind the bars of the booth he worked in. It is a sad image for the poet to have of his late father, one in which his father is forever in the cage of his workplace, far away from his home country. We know the poet's father has died because he refers to his father's forehead as being 'ghostly'. This word, 'ghostly' also reminds us of stanza one in which Montague refers to his father's 'pallor'. It is interesting to note the poet's use of the word 'descend' in this stanza; he descends into the underground but also into memories and feelings of guilt.

Themes:

The poet's relationship with his father.

Exile, the difficulties faced by the Irish who emigrated to America.

Loneliness, isolation, the feeling of being trapped

Tone:

The tone at the start of the poem is conversational and factual.

The becomes quite sarcastic when the poet is talking about his father being a 'traditional' Irish man.

In the fourth and fifth stanza, the poet shows some empathy for his father's situation.

The poem ends on a sad, realistic note. There is a sense of hopelessness as the poet reveals that his lasting memory of his father will be of a trapped and defeated man.
The Locket

Sing a last song
For the lady who has gone,
fertile source of guilt and pain.
The worst birth in the annals of Brooklyn,
that was my cue to come on,
my first claim to fame.

Naturally, she longed for a girl,
and all my infant curls of brown
couldn’t excuse my double blunder
coming out the wrong sex,
and the wrong way around.
Not readily forgiven,

So you never nursed me
and when all my father’s songs
couldn’t sweeten the lack of money,
‘when poverty comes through the door
love flies up your chimney’,
your favourite saying.

Then you gave me away,
might never have known me,
if I had not cycled down
to court you like a young man,
teasingly untying your apron,
drinking by the fire, yarning

Of your wild, young days
which didn’t last long, for you,
lovely Molly, the belle of your small town,
landed up mournful and chill
as the constant rain that lashes it
wound into your cocoon of pain.

Standing in that same hallway,
'Don't come again,' you say, roughly,
'I start to get fond of you, John,
and then you are up and gone';
the harsh logic of a forlorn woman
resigned to being alone.

And still, mysterious blessing,
I never knew, until you were gone,
that, always around your neck
you wore an oval locket
with an old picture in it,
of a child in Brooklyn.

**Background**

In a 1988 *Irish University Review* interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Montague says, 'My work is riddled with human pain' and this poem is no exception. Yet, in the same interview, he claims that 'the ultimate function of the poet is to praise'. So this poem can be seen as both a memory of the poet’s troubled relationship with his mother and, at the same time, recognition of the love she felt for him but was never able to acknowledge during her lifetime.

Montague has said that while a man can identify with the death of a father – they are both men – ‘the death of the woman who gave you birth is a very deep experience’. When Montague and his second wife had children, he felt that he finally understood just how important the mother is to the children and vice versa. He wondered how his mother had made the difficult decision to give him away and not reclaim him when she returned to Ireland and saw how happy and cared for he was.
Summary and analysis:

Stanza One:

The opening lines of the poem could be seen as a combination of a lament and a nursery rhyme. This has the effect of bringing together the little boy who longed for a mother’s love and the older man who must now mourn her passing. This lament contains little praise until the end, however. Montague honestly and openly explores the difficult relationship between mother and son and describes it as a ‘fertile source of guilt and pain’.

The fourth line of the poem is in italics, suggesting that it is a quotation from his mother – probably one which he often heard – about the pain she suffered giving birth to him. His was a breech delivery (feet first rather than the usual head first) and he wryly describes it as his ‘cue to come on’ and his ‘first claim to fame’. The ironic use of the language of the stage: ‘cue to come on’ and ‘claim to fame’ reminds us that while a child is usually centre-stage in its mother’s world, the poet was anything but. Neither did he choose to be such a source of distress, despite language which implies that it was his choice to ‘come on’ at that moment. It is easy to imagine why the poet would feel guilt each time this story was retold, and the pain could be seen as both the mother’s physical pain and his sorrow on realising that his birth was so far from a source of joy.

Stanza Two:

There is bitterness in the second stanza as the poet says that he committed the ‘double blunder’ of being born a boy when his mother ‘longed for a girl’, and being a breech birth. The repetition of the word ‘wrong’ in lines four and five reinforces the idea that the baby was not only unwelcome but was blamed for something that could not possibly have been his fault. Juxtaposed with ‘infant curls of brown’, this image of a resentful and disappointed mother seems most unnatural and unfair. How could a new-born baby make any sort of ‘blunder’, let alone a ‘double blunder’? This is a deeply sad observation and the final line, which tells us that the child was not ‘readily forgiven’ for the accident of his birth, is heart breaking.
Stanza Three:

The third stanza begins with a resigned ‘So’. The poet seems to accept the inevitability of his parents’ disintegrating marriage and his mother’s rejection of him. The poem becomes even more painfully personal here as Montague’s mother, who has up to now been referred to as ‘she’, becomes ‘you’. By addressing his mother directly, the poet seems to be finally talking openly to her about their relationship. The mother’s lack of maternal feeling is linked to the family’s lack of money; one of her ‘favourite sayings’ is ‘when poverty comes through the door / love flies up the chimney’. Like the constant retelling of the story of the poet’s birth, the ‘favourite saying’ shows just how bitter and painful life was for the family at the time. They had little to celebrate and focused instead on sorrow and disappointment. Montague’s father may have tried to distract them and lighten the mood with music, but to no avail: ‘my father’s songs / couldn’t sweeten the lack of money’. While the poet appears to be accusing his mother of failing him, he also seems to understand the difficulties his parents were facing. The love which ‘flies up the window’ is not just the love of a mother for a child but also the love between husband and wife. In the face of such hardship, there is no room for sentiment. The birth of a child is usually something which cements the parents’ love for one another, but if they are under immense pressure it merely serves to exacerbate their unhappiness. After all, a new baby could be seen as yet another mouth to feed.

Stanza Four:

If the third stanza’s opening ‘So’ implied a sense of resignation and inevitability, the word ‘Then’ at the start of the fourth stanza reinforces this idea. It is almost as if the events unfolded in such a way as to leave the participants with no choice whatsoever. This is certainly the case for the young boy who was given away. There is something horribly stark and accusatory in the phrase ‘you gave me away’. The verb ‘gave’ implies that her action was deliberate: he was not taken from her. The simplicity of the line adds to its impact: there is no avoiding the harsh reality. In a few simple words we understand the poet’s hurt at this abandonment, yet the previous stanzas show us that at some level he knows why his mother was driven to do what she did. This is a complicated situation and it is no wonder that the poet is still trying to come to terms with it. Were he to see the situation purely from his own point of view, it would be easier, but he is a thoughtful and reflective man who is capable of seeing the event from his mother’s perspective while still feeling hurt and confused.
When Montague’s mother returned to Ireland, she did not reclaim him from the spinster aunts who had taken him in and were raising him in a loving, caring manner. Montague recalls having to be reintroduced to her when she arrived at the house as he had not seen her since he was four. In the fourth stanza, he claims that his mother ‘might never have known’ him if he had not made the effort to visit her. He compares his position to that of a young man courting a young woman, winning her affection by coaxing her to sit by the fire with him and talking of her younger days.

Stanza Five:

Montague’s sympathy for him mother is shown in the fifth stanza when he tells us of the ‘wild, young days’ she had that ‘didn’t last long’. All too soon, she was to become trapped in poverty and an unhappy marriage. She had been ‘lovely Molly’, a local beauty in her ‘small town’, but now her life is in sharp contrast to those carefree days of long ago. The adjectives ‘mournful and chill’ highlight the sadness of the poet’s mother’s life and also the coldness created by her rejection of him as a baby. It seems clear that her life is a disappointment to her and she is filled with regret, clinging to those memories as her only source of joy. The simile in which the poet compares his mother’s life to ‘constant rain’ is particularly apt and perfectly captures the misery of her situation. She has retreated into her own world and is in a ‘cocoon of pain’.

Stanza Six:

Montague’s mother is given a voice again in this stanza. She tells her son not to visit again as she is becoming ‘too fond’ of him and is unwilling to risk the pain of loss once more. Her voice is ‘rough’ and her logic ‘harsh’, but Montague recognises that this ‘forlorn woman’ has chosen to live a solitary life and avoid any future pain by so doing. That way, she cannot be hurt if her son leaves. This second rejection must be terribly difficult for the poet, yet he shows his sympathy in his description of her as ‘forlorn’.
Stanza Seven:

The final stanza offers us some relief from the sorrow and bleakness that have dominated the poem up to this point. On his mother’s death, the poet discovers that she has always worn a locket containing a baby picture of him. He is astonished: ‘I never knew’, and regards the discovery as a ‘mysterious blessing’. While it is deeply sad that Montague’s mother could never express love for him when she was alive, he now realises that her rejections were not a sign that she did not love him at all. There is forgiveness and healing in these final lines and the poem ends on a positive, touching note.

Themes:

The poet’s difficult relationship with his mother

The devastating effect that poverty and hardship can have on individuals and families

Tone:

The poet sympathises with his mother’s situation but there is also deep regret and pain when he speaks of her rejection of him. However, the ending of the poem is quite uplifting as he discovers that despite her mother’s words and deeds, she did care about him and always wore a locket containing a picture of him.

‘Standing-stones and streams are not part of Brooklyn, nor are cailleachs. To judge by my contemporaries I would probably have been a writer, certainly a journalist, had I stayed in America. But who cut the long wound of poetry into my youth? Was it my mother who chose for her own good reasons to cast me off?’

Killing the Pig

The noise.

He was pulled out, squealing,
An iron cleek sunk in the roof
Of his mouth.

(Don’t say they are not intelligent:
they know the hour has come
and they want none of it;
they dig in their little trotters
will not go dumb or singing
to the slaughter.)

That high-pitched final effort,
no single sound could match it –

a big plane roaring off,
a diva soaring towards her last note,
the brain-chilling persistence of an electric saw,
scrap being crushed.

Piercing & absolute,
only high heaven ignores it.

Then a full stop.
Mickey Boyle plants
a solid thump of the mallet
flat between the ears.

Swiftly the knife seeks the throat;
swiftly the other cleavers work
till the carcass is hung up
shining and eviscerated as
a surgeon’s coat.
A child is given
the bladder to play with.
But the walls of the farmyard
still hold that scream,
are built around it.

**Background:**

Montague has a keen interest in nature, the environment and traditional farming methods. He says that growing up in Garvaghy he was aware of ‘the old pastoral rhythms’ and he saw ‘the earth cultivated in a natural way’. He believes modern farming methods are forcing us to lose touch with the land and with ‘our brother animals’ who should be looked after and treated with respect. However, even if the animals on a traditional farm are well-treated, there will come a day for most of them when they have to be slaughtered for food or because they are too old to be of value. Here, Montague remembers an incident from his childhood which had a profound impact on him.

The poem may remind some readers of Heaney’s ‘The Early Purges’ which also deals with the casual cruelty and death dealt out on ‘well-run farms’ and the effect that such events can have on some of those who witness them.

**Summary and analysis:**

The title of the poem leaves us in no doubt what the subject matter will be. The poet does not say that ‘a’ pig is killed but rather ‘the’ pig. The use of the definite article gives the pig an identity of sorts, something which is picked up again later in the poem when the pig is referred to as ‘he’ rather than ‘it’.

The opening line of the poem stands alone and comprised two simple words: ‘The noise.’ Having read the title, we can easily put two and two together and deduce that the noise to which the poet refers is that made by the pig as it is killed. We can go a little further and imagine how horrific the noise must have been if it is the first thing the poet mentions. The full stop and the setting apart of the first line create a natural pause as we allow the thought of ‘The noise’ to sink in.

The description of the pig being pulled out of his pen is graphic and disturbing. An iron
hook is ‘sunk in the roof / of his mouth’ and he squeals in pain and terror. Again, by saying ‘his mouth’ rather than ‘its mouth’, the poet adds to the sense of the pig being a creature with its own identity and – we presume – feelings. The pig has to be ‘pulled out,’ implying that he resisted and had to be dragged to his death in fear and agony.

One of the arguments often put forward in defence of the slaughter of animals is that they are unintelligent and have no understanding of what is about to happen to them. Montague dismisses this quite vehemently in the next section of the poem. He pre-empts the statement and dares us to say pigs are dumb creatures. He highlights the pigs’ vulnerability and small size when he says that they dig in ‘their little trotters’. The pigs resist until the very end. Those who would like to console themselves with the thought of pigs going happily – ‘singing to the slaughter’ – are not allowed any such pretence. The repeated ‘s’ sounds here make it easy to imagine the poet hissing these words quite bitterly. At this stage, we cannot help but feel sympathy for the pig whose plight has been so eloquently described.

Now Montague returns to the opening line of the poem. The pig’s ‘final effort’ is futile and its final scream is so dreadful that no one sound could fully capture it. Therefore, the poet uses four powerful and unforgettable metaphors to bring to life the dreadful sound of death. First he compares it to the ‘roaring’ of a plane taking off. This is such a loud noise that it drowns out everything else as long as it lasts. There is no ignoring the sound. Second, Montague says that the pig’s scream is like a singer reaching the highest pitch of her song. It is significant that it is the ‘last note’, because this is the last sound the pig will ever utter. The internal rhyme in ‘roaring’ and ‘soaring’ link the two aural images and the long vowel sounds in both help us to imagine the lengthy, final wail of the terrified animal. The next images are even more disturbing. The disturbing nature of the pig’s scream is perfectly captured as it is compared to the ‘brain-chilling persistence of an electric saw’. All we want is for the noise to stop. Finally, the pig’s squealing is likened to the tortured screech of metal as scrap is crushed. The reference to scrap metal reminds us that, like scrap, the pig is of little value. The harsh ‘c’ sounds in these words add to the disturbing effect of these metaphors.

The pig’s last-ditch attempt to draw attention to its pain and terror is evoked by the adjectives ‘piercing’ and ‘absolute’. The pig has put everything he has into this final cry which has burnt itself indelibly into the poet’s mind and yet the ‘high heaven’ ignores it. Is this the poet’s way of saying that God, if there is one, is indifferent to the suffering of his creatures? It is a sobering and bleak view of divinity.

Mercifully, for the listener at least, the sound ceases: ‘Then a full stop’. The use of an
actual full stop at the end of this line captures the abruptness of the ending. The scene is
given added realism by the use of the name of the man who stuns the pig with "a solid
thump of the mallet".

The action has moved slowly up until this point, reflecting the fact that the dreadfulness of
the pig’s tortured squeals made its final moments seem to drag on for a long time.

The repetition of the word ‘swiftly’ shows us that this is a job the workers have done
many times before. The knife used is personified as it ‘seeks the throat’, almost as if it
longs to kill. This is a deeply unsettling image and it replaces any graphic description of
the slaughter and butchering of the pig. The pig, earlier given an identity, is now merely
‘the carcass’. It is reduced to nothing more than meat and bones.

How you view the first lines of the final stanza is up to you. On the one hand, it could be
seen as a moment of light relief from the tension and violence that marked the poem up
to this point. Innocent children are given the pig’s bladder to play with, perhaps
signalling that life goes on and there is more to the farm than death. It is also a place of
growth and happiness. On the other hand, these lines could be read as a rather grim
comment on the callousness of farm life. The horror the poet has described is nothing
special here; it is just another part of daily life.

The poet, however, will not soon forget the event and his sympathy for the pig is evident
throughout the poem. He says that the ‘walls of the farmyard’ will contain ‘that scream’.
They are ‘built around it’, which implies that suffering and death are part of the reality of
this world and there would be no farm without such slaughter.

**Themes:** Human indifference to the pain and suffering we cause in the natural world.

**Tone:** The poet is horrified by the pig’s suffering and cannot forget its final tortured
squeals of pain and panic. His sympathy for the creature is clear throughout. He
appears angry and quite bitter about those who fool themselves by pretending that
animals are too dumb to know that they are facing death. At the same time, there is an
acceptance that this is an integral part of the reality of life on a farm.
Windharp

for Patrick Collins

The sounds of Ireland,
that restless whispering
you never get away
from, seeping out of
low bushes and grass
heatherbells and fern
wringling bog pools,
scraping tree branches,
light hunting cloud,
sound hounding sight,
a hand ceaselessly
combing and stroking
the landscape, till
the valley gleams
like the pile upon
a mountain pony's coat.

Title:

A windharp, or Aeolian harp, is a type of box harp in which strings are stretched
between two bridges. (Aeolus was the Greek god of the winds.) The strings are the
same length, but are different thicknesses and are all tuned to the same pitch. The
strings vibrate when the wind passes
over them, thus making music. King
David is said to have hung his lyre in his
bedroom window at night to enjoy the
music made by the breeze. The first
recorded windharp was made in the 17th
century and in the late 18th and 19th
centuries windharps became popular
with Romantic poets in England and Germany. They believed that the harp translated
the truth and beauty of nature into music and some placed small windharps in windows to catch the breeze. Aeolian harps are still popular today and are made in a variety of forms, some of which are designed to be left outside permanently. Here is a link to a site where you can hear the music:

http://www.mohicanwindharps.com/?gclid=CJerjfC0vI8CFRIUagodXhgFTw

Background:

Montague was inspired to write this poem after viewing an exhibition of Patrick Collins’ work. Collins – 1911 to 1984, was one of the most important Irish painters of the 20th century. He was born in Sligo and began painting in the 1930s, becoming a full-time painter in 1945. He drew inspiration from the Irish landscape and people. In the foreword to the book Patrick Collins, the Chairman of the Arts Council, James White, says that Collins ‘made a unique contribution to painting in our time by his power to evoke an aspect of Ireland which captures not only the primary image of the place and the people, but also its spiritual content. His grey-blue landscapes contain images of households, farms and figures, which emerge with a curious imprecise shape that is ultimately seen to be marked by folk-memory and by legend. Like a poet with words, his images penetrate areas beyond exact statement or description – they belong to the area of suggestion and imagination’.

If Collins’ paintings are visual poetry, then Montague’s poem is a word picture. The two complement each other wonderfully.

Summary and analysis:

This poem is written as one single sentence, which effectively captures the idea of the constant movement of wind and shadow across the Irish landscape.

The landscape is particularly Irish and that fact is made clear in the opening line: ‘The sounds of Ireland’.

There is something not altogether pleasant about the wind: it is like a ‘restless whispering’ from which you cannot escape. The run-
on lines here reinforce the idea that the wind is ever-present and is something ‘you
never get away / from’. There is also a suggestion that the Irish landscape is always with
Irish people. In a 1972 Thomas Davis lecture Montague said, ‘An Irishman may travel,
but the memory of his maternal landscape persists.’ Interestingly, in the same lecture he
quotes a poem ascribed to St. Columcille in which the exiled saint longs for the ‘Clamour
of the wind making music / in the elms’. The idea of our country’s natural melodies is
not a new one, as Columcille left our shores around 1,500 years ago.

The sibilance reflects the hiss and sigh of the wind in the leaves and rushes. The ‘restless
whispering’ also brings to mind the low babble of many voices and Montague has said
that this poem can be seen as a metaphor for the diverse voices of the Irish people –
North and South – and an effort to show how all can exist together and create a sort of
harmony, just as the different strings of a windharp work together to make music. The
word ‘restless’ makes this image an unsettling one and yet the overall effect of the wind
on the land is unifying and positive: eventually the whole valley ‘gleams’ as a result of its
action.

The rustle of the grasses and ‘low bushes’ is compared to
water ‘seeping’ out of the earth. There is nothing particularly
pleasant about this image. It may be natural, but it is slow and
the word ‘seeping’ has negative connotations. However, the
breeze rises and the sound changes to a gentle melody as the
‘heatherbells and ferns’ move with the wind. The assonant ‘e’
sound and the way the short syllables trip off the tongue
suggest the tinkling of bells, which is picked up by the
reference to the tiny, bell-like flowers on the heather when it is in bloom.

The poet moves on to visual imagery now to describe the wind creating ripples and
ridges on the surface of the bog pools as it passes. It also produces a ‘scraping’ sound as
tree branches rub against one another. The verbs ‘wrinkling’ and ‘scraping’ are
negative and remind us that nature can be harsh. This is not a Romantic, idealised view
of the landscape but a realistic, evocative one. The word ‘scraping’ is onomatopoeic and
reinforces the idea that this wind can create unmelodic sounds as easily as melodic ones.
However, all of these sounds are part of ‘The sounds of Ireland’ and each has a place in
the music. Again, this reminds us that even if there are voices in our country that grate,
they have a place and can be incorporated into the final tune.
Now Montague moves onto the images of light and shade. The images of the wind causing cloud and light to hunt or hound one another across the sky is a rather menacing one. The internal rhyme in 'sound hounding' mimics the repetitive noise of hounds in full cry as they race across fields.

The final lines of the poem show the wind in a more positive light. Now it is compared to an affectionate hand tenderly stroking and combing the landscape just as one might groom a pony's coat. The 'valley gleams' or shines in the same way a well-groomed coat would. This is a wonderfully vivid, tactile image and it is easy to imagine oneself looking down into a valley where the wind is flattening the long grass and rushes as it passes over them. The long 'o' sounds in 'combing' and 'stroking' slow the pace of the poem at that point and bring to mind the long strokes of a brush on a horse's coat.

References:


Wie was das möglich?

That final newsreel of the war:
A welcoming party of almost shades
Met us at the cinema door
Clicking what remained of their heels.

From nests of bodies like hatching eggs
Flickered insectlike hans and legs
And rose an ululation, terrible, shy;
Children conjugating the verb ‘to die’.

One clamoured mutely of love
From a mouth like a burnt glove;
Others upheld hands bleak as begging bowls,
Claiming the small change of our souls.

Some smiled at us as protectors.
Can these bones live?
Our parochial brand of innocence
Was all we had to give.

To be always at the periphery of incident
Gave my childhood its Irish dimension; drama of unevent:
Yet doves of mercy, as doves of air,
Can falter here as anywhere.

That long dead Sunday in Armagh
I learnt one meaning of total war
And went home to my Christian school
To belt a football through the air.
Background:

In 1945 as the war was drawing to an end, Montague was a sixteen year old student in boarding school in Armagh. He and the other students were brought to the cinema, where, as well as films, newsreels were shown. Montague recalls seeing a newsreel of the liberation of the concentration camps. It is easy to imagine how horrifying such a sight must have been for the boys and what a lasting impact it would have made on them. There is a Pathté newsreel of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on youtube which I feel captures much of what is dealt with in this poem. Viewer discretion is advised: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KCKagd6Ihk

Summary and analysis:

Title:

The title of the poem suggests a happy occasion, perhaps one in which an important person is greeted on arrival at an event. However, the German words in italics underneath change the mood immediately and cause us to wonder who is asking, ‘How was this possible?’ and why.

Stanza One:

The word ‘That’ to describe the ‘final newsreel of the war’ immediately focuses our attention on the importance of the film. It is not simply ‘a’ newsreel but is one that has remained with the poet to this day. Many of the films of the liberation of the camps show the survivors walking towards the cameramen and to the boys walking into the cinema it must have appeared as if these emaciated men, women and children were walking out of the screen towards them. The impression they make is so strong and the poet becomes so immersed in the images he is seeing that it is almost as if he is part of the film. The survivors are described as ‘almost shades’, or ghosts. (In a 1945 radio report on the liberation of a concentration camp, Richard Dimbleby describes the scene in a similar way, saying that the people walking towards the British troops were more like ghosts than living men and women.1)

1 http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/holocaust/5115.shtml
The final line of the stanza is particularly powerful. Heel clicking was a form of salute in the German army and the noise was achieved by the heels of the soldier’s boots snapping together as he stood to attention. In this case, however, the heels click because the people are reduced so emaciated that if their limbs touch their bones click much as a skeleton’s might. The word ‘clicking’ is onomatopoeic, further bringing to life the horror of this image. By bringing the two ideas together, Montague reminds us that it was the ruthless efficiency of a well-trained army that created this suffering and death.

Stanza Two:

The second stanza is even more horrifically realistic than the first. People, dead and dying, are lying together in heaps and, just as insects emerge from eggs laid in decaying flesh, so do the hands and legs of those still strong enough to move. The word ‘insectlike’ captures both the dehumanising effect that the camps have had on these people and the terrible emaciation which leaves their limbs looking like the stick-thin legs of insects.

The moaning and wailing of the people in their agony and desperation is a terrible ‘ululation’. The sound is not particularly loud: it is described as ‘shy’, almost as if these weak and defeated people have lost all hope that they will be heard and are afraid to ask for help. The poet is struck by the fact that children of his own age, who should be reciting verbs in school are instead merely conjugating the verb ‘to die’: I die, you die, he dies...’

Stanza Three:

This stanza opens with an oxymoron\(^2\) describing a child who ‘clamoured mutely’ for affection. It is heart-breaking that all the child wants is love and the description of the child’s mouth – it is ‘like a burnt glove’ – brings to mind both the leathery texture of skin shrunken over bones and the crematoriums where so many other camp inmates were burned. Other survivors hold up hands as they beg for nothing but kindness and compassion, which Montague calls ‘the small change of our souls’. It is not a lot to ask.

\(^2\) A figure of speech in which two contradictory words are used together
Stanza Four:

As the poet watches the film, the line between the newsreel and the reality of his own life becomes increasingly blurred. Earlier he imagined that the figures on the screen were walking out to meet him and his fellow classmates at the entrance to the cinema, now he seems to believe that they are smiling at the boys as ‘protectors’. He is still bemused by what he sees and wonders how such skeletal figures can live. He is aware that he and his friends have nothing to give but their ‘parochial brand of innocence’. In the face of such horror, he feels helpless.

Stanza Five:

Montague comments on the fact that being Irish during World War Two meant being at the edge of the events that took place without actually being involved. Ireland was neutral during the war and it was a ‘drama of unevent’ compared to what was happening elsewhere. However, Montague points out that human compassion can fail in Ireland just as easily as it can elsewhere. He may be commenting on the Irish response to the horror of the concentration camps or he may be pointing out that we are also capable of inflicting terrible suffering on our own people. The question ‘How was this possible?’ is answered to an extent here. Evil is not limited to any particular country or any particular time.

Stanza Six:

In the final stanza, the poet reflects on the lasting impact of that ‘long dead Sunday in Armagh’. It was then that he realised for the first time what ‘total war’ means: innocent men, women and children suffer and die. This is an important moment for the young poet. It is likely that the war footage he would have seen up to this point would have been British newsreels telling of exciting Allied victories abroad – all stirring stuff for a teenage boy. The ‘final’ film, however, is a shocking and sobering insight into what war really means. The young Montague’s frustration is evident as he belts a football through the air in an effort to vent his feelings. There is a hint of bitterness in his mentioning the fact that his school is a Christian one. Despite the teachings of the church on loving and helping your fellow man, Montague and his fellow students are powerless to do anything to help children their own age who are struggling desperately to live.

Themes: Man’s inhumanity to man, cruelty and suffering, and coming of age.
Like Dolmens Round My Childhood

Like dolmens round my childhood, the old people.

Jamie MacCrystal sang to himself,
A broken song without tune, without words;
He tipped me a penny every pension day,
Fed kindly crusts to winter birds.
When he died his cottage was robbed,
Mattress and money box torn and searched.
Only the corpse they didn't disturb.

Maggie Owens was surrounded by animals,
A mongrel bitch and shivering pups,
Even in her bedroom a she-goat cried.
She was a well of gossip defiled,
Fanged chronicler of a whole countryside:
Reputed a witch, all I could find
Was her lonely need to deride.

The Nialls lived along a mountain lane
Where heather bells bloomed, clumps of foxglove.
All were blind, with Blind Pension and Wireless,
Dead eyes serpent-flicked as one entered
To shelter from a downpour of mountain rain.
Crickets chirped under the rocking hearthstone
Until the muddy sun shone out again.

Mary Moore lived in a crumbling gatehouse,
Famous as Pisa for its leaning gable.
Bag-apron and boots, she tramped the fields
Driving lean cattle from a miry stable.
A by-word for fierceness, she fell asleep
Over love stories, Red Star and Red Circle,
Dreamed of gypsy love rites, by firelight sealed.
Wild Billy Eagleson married a Catholic servant girl
When all his Loyal family passed on:
We danced round him shouting ‘To Hell with King Billy,’
And dodged from the arc of his flailing blackthorn.
Forsaken by both creeds, he showed little concern
Until the Orange drums banged past in the summer
And bowler and sash aggressively shone.

Curate and doctor trudged to attend them,
Through knee-deep snow, through summer heat,
From main road to lane to broken path,
Gulping the mountain air with painful breath.
Sometimes they were found by neighbours,
Silent keepers of a smokeless hearth,
Suddenly cast in the mould of death.

Ancient Ireland, indeed! I was reared by her bedside,
The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.
Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,
For years they trespassed on my dreams,
Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
I felt their shadows pass

Into that dark permanence of ancient forms

Background:
This poem first appeared in the Poisoned Lands, Montague’s second volume of poetry in 1961. The critic Matthew Campbell says that it ‘both mocks “ancient Ireland” in all its stereotypical guises, but is simultaneously seduced by it’. Montague has said of this poem that it is ‘riddled with human pain’. At the same time, it is this community and these people which have helped to forge Montague’s identity. Seamus Heaney said of him, ‘When Montague asks who he is, he is forced to seek a connection with a history and a heritage; before he affirms a personal identity, he points to a national identity, and his

3 ‘The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Poetry’, edited by Matthew Campbell
region and his community provide a lifeline to it.

Summary and analysis

Stanza One:

The poet begins by comparing the elderly neighbours he knew when he was young to ‘dolmens round my childhood’. Dolmens are prehistoric tombs consisting of two or more upright stones supporting a flat capstone. By comparing the old people to dolmens, Montague makes them seem both a lasting, important part of our landscape and history, and also suggests that the neighbours were a looming, dominating, almost frightening presence in the young boy’s life.

The first character to whom we are introduced is Jamie MacCrystal. Like the other neighbours, his name is given and thus he instantly becomes a real figure. The picture we are presented with is wonderfully evocative. He seems a contented and gentle man who sang to himself and gave the young poet ‘a penny every pension day’. The repeated ‘p’ sounds here evoke the image of the repeated dropping of a coin into the boy’s outstretched hand. However, the song he sang was ‘broken’ and ‘without tune, without words’, suggesting that the man’s life was perhaps as disjointed and directionless as his song. The songs he sang were ‘to himself’ rather than to anyone else, highlighting his isolation and loneliness.

Although Jamie MacCrystal was a kind man who even feeds the birds throughout the winter, his generosity was not rewarded with respect. Unnamed figures ransacked his cottage and turned it upside down in search of money. The verb ‘torn’ highlights the violence with which the furnishings and contents of the old man’s house were searched by these pitiless individuals. The ugliness and soullessness of this act is not directly commented on by Montague but there is an unspoken judgement in the line ‘Only the corpse they didn’t disturb’. As is the case in all of Montague’s poetry, we see that he is not an idealist and is capable of showing us that generosity and kindness can live side-by-side with callousness and selfishness.

4 Seamus Heaney, ‘The Sense of Place’ [1977]
Stanza Two:

The description of the next neighbour, Maggie Owens, appears at the outset to be more sinister than that of Jamie MacCrystal. She was 'surrounded by animals' but there is little nurturing or positivity in this image. The mongrel bitch's pups shivered and the nanny goat 'cried' in her bedroom. This negative imagery is continued in the following lines when we learn that this woman was a well-spring of malicious gossip and resembled a poisonous snake or 'Fanged chronicler' whose damaging and dangerous rumours dripped like venom from fangs. The impression given is that she knew what everyone was up to and ensured that the worst possible slant was put on all of it.

The final lines of the stanza bring us back to reality when Montague says that although this old woman was regarded as a witch, he saw – even as a boy – her loneliness and the fact that her bitter words were a product of her sad life.

Stanza Three:

In the third stanza, we are introduced to the Niall family. Although they lived in a beautiful place where 'heather bells bloomed', they could not see any of this loveliness because they were all blind. They lived on a disability allowance and listened to a radio provided by the State. The poet remembers seeking shelter in their house 'from a downpour of mountain rain', so the Nialls were obviously welcoming. However, their sightless eyes flickering back and forth like those of a snake frightened the young poet. The sun after the rain is described as a 'muddy sun': the Niall's world was one of shadow and darkness.

Stanza Four:

Mary Moore is yet another character who is not quite what she seems. She lived in a 'crumbling gatehouse', and eked out a poor living running a farm. The poet's humour is evident in his description of the gable end of her house resembling the Leaning Tower of Pisa. This tough, fierce old woman wore an apron made from sacking and housed her thin cattle in a filthy stable, but like all the characters we have met so far, she had another side to her. Montague evokes our sympathy for Mary Moore when he tells us that she often fell asleep in her chair, reading cheap romance novels. There is something deeply sad about the lonely old lady dreaming of love as she sits by the fire.
Stanza Five:

Billy Eagleson also lived between worlds. A Loyalist, he married a Catholic girl when his family had died. The implication here is that they would not have approved such a match. Montague shows us the sectarian nature of life in Northern Ireland at the time as he describes himself and his young friends taunting Billy by mocking his Loyalist values, easily dodging the blows he aimed at them with his walking stick. Billy did not fit into the community because he belonged neither to the Catholic or Protestant side. The word ‘forsaken’ highlights his isolation. It was only during the Orange marching season that Billy’s situation caused him distress. The sectarian tension and aggression in the divided community is perfectly captured by the onomatopoeic ‘Orange drums banged past’.

Montague’s cinematic style is evident in this poem when he cuts from one image to the next and describes each one vividly, bringing both the characters and the place to life.

Stanza Six:

Eventually, all of these elderly characters fell ill and died. Isolated during their lifetimes, they are united only by this common aspect of humanity. Their physical isolation is clear here too: the doctor and priest had to make a difficult journey to reach them in times of need. The verb ‘trudged’ suggests both the long walk up infrequently used mountain lanes and ‘broken path’ to reach the old people, and also a sense that this was a duty call – not welcomed but necessary. This impression is reinforced by the description of the visitors ‘Gulping the mountain air with painful breath’. If the curate and doctor find the journey so arduous, it is easy to infer that the elderly people themselves would be effectively trapped in their out-of-the-way homes.

Sometimes it was neighbours who found the dead bodies by the cold firesides. The sibilance in the line ‘Silent keepers of smokeless hearth’ emphasises the stillness and silence of these lifeless houses. In death, the old people resemble statues and we are reminded again of the dolmens: stones marking where the dead lie.

Stanza Seven:

Although this poem chronicles the lives of the poet’s neighbours rather than his own life, it is nonetheless deeply personal. One critic remarked that ‘Montague’s most personal dialogue has been conducted through his own family and those who inhabited his
childhood. The community in which he grew up shaped Montague’s identity and he recognises the role each member played. In this final stanza, Montague addresses the reality of Irish life compared to the idealised version of ‘Ancient Ireland’. There is some bitterness in the way he says ‘Ancient Ireland indeed!’ and says that he knows the country far too well – ‘I was reared by her bedside’ – to be taken in by any romantic notions of the place. He describes a land in which pagan fears and superstition reigned: ‘The rune and the chant’ and in which old women like Maggie Owens were labelled as witches on the basis of rumours of the ‘evil eye’. Family and local feuds are waged with ‘Formorian fierceness’. The Formorians are a mythical race said to have lived in Ireland in ancient times. They are linked to chaos and wildness and are depicted as demonic giants who could call up storms, diseases and other natural challenges for mankind.

The old people of Montague's childhood were a mixture of friendly and frightening. They made a lasting impression on him and appeared in his dreams as trespassers, suggesting these memories were not welcome. However, Montague broke free of their influence and, by extension, the Ireland they represented. He stood in a circle of standing stones and there felt the ghostly figures of his past fade into shadow.

The final line of the poem, like the first, stands alone. This reflects the distance between the dead and the living as well as reminding us of the old people’s isolation during their lifetime.

Themes:
Coming of age, identity, childhood, sense of place

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5 Sean Dunne, ‘History Lessons: A Note on John Montague’s Relationship With the Past’ – Poetry Ireland’s Poetry Review Issue No. 27
Montague: Quotes

‘Poetry opens up a hinge into the unconscious, and to the unconscious of other people with whom you are connected. I guess you can call that a form of prayer if you like.’

‘There is a famous phrase of Auden’s, which is: poetry is breaking bread with the dead.’

‘He returned to Ireland in 1952, so that was 18 years in between I didn’t see him, so I was inclined afterwards to be kind to him I think. One time when I was working away at my typewriter, in those later years, he came into the room to me, and he said, “I frittered away all my chances, John. All my chances”’.  

*John Montague in an interview with J.P. O’Malley – Irish Examiner Saturday, October 22, 2011*
W. B. Yeats – Brief Biography

Born in Dublin in 1865, William Butler Yeats was the son of a well-known Irish painter, John Butler Yeats. He spent his childhood in County Sligo, where his parents were raised, and in London. He returned to Dublin at the age of fifteen to continue his education and study painting, but quickly discovered he preferred poetry.

Born into the Anglo-Irish landowning class, Yeats became involved with the Celtic Revival, a movement against the cultural influences of English rule in Ireland during the Victorian period, which sought to promote the spirit of Ireland’s native heritage. Though Yeats never learned Gaelic himself, his writing at the turn of the century drew extensively from sources in Irish mythology and folklore. Also a potent influence on his poetry was the Irish revolutionary Maud Gonne, whom he met in 1889, a woman equally famous for her passionate nationalist politics and her beauty. Though she married another man in 1903 and grew apart from Yeats (and Yeats himself was eventually married to another woman, Georgie Hyde Lees), she remained a powerful figure in his poetry.

Yeats was deeply involved in politics in Ireland, and in the twenties, despite Irish independence from England, his verse reflected a pessimism about the political situation in his country and the rest of Europe, paralleling the increasing conservativism of his American counterparts in London, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. His work after 1910 was strongly influenced by Pound, becoming more modern in its concision and imagery, but Yeats never abandoned his strict adherence to traditional verse forms. He had a life-long interest in mysticism and the occult, which was off-putting to some readers, but he remained uninhibited in advancing his idiosyncratic philosophy, and his poetry continued to grow stronger as he grew older. Appointed a senator of the Irish Free State in 1922, he is remembered as an important cultural leader, as a major playwright (he was one of the founders of the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin), and as one of the very greatest poets—in any language—of the century. W. B. Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923 and died in 1939 at the age of 73.

Source: www.poets.org
The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a-glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Glossary and comment

Innisfree: Derived from the Irish ‘Inis Fraoch’ – Island of Heather. The ‘free’ in the name has nothing to do with freedom.

Wattles – Wooden poles, intertwined with thin branches to form a wall or roof.

Glimmer – flicker of light (here used to mean the twinkle of stars).

Linnet – a small song bird, once commonly kept as a cage bird because of its beautiful singing.

Background

Yeats wrote this poem in 1888 when he was a young man, living in London. He was lonely and homesick for Ireland at the time. Looking in a shop window, he saw a toy fountain and the sound of the water reminded him of lake water. Inspired by this, he wrote ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’.
Summary and analysis

Stanza One

The poem opens very formally with the words 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.' It has been pointed out that these words echo those of the prodigal son in the Bible when he says, ‘I will arise and go to my father.’ These biblical overtones reinforce the idea of Innisfree being an almost holy place and bring to mind the prodigal son's sense of relief when he resolved to leave his chaotic, unhappy life and return to his childhood home – a place of serenity and simplicity.

The poet goes on to describe the life he will lead on the island. He will be completely self-sufficient, having ‘nine bean rows’ and ‘a hive for the honey-bee’. The poet’s vision is of a romantic, idyllic, timeless way of life. Yeats imagines living in peace and solitude; he says he will ‘live alone in the bee-loud glade.’ The only sounds will be of nature. It seems that Yeats is rejecting the hustle and bustle of the modern world. The details in the poem give it a timeless quality; there is no hint of the modern world in Yeats’ vision of the island. The only mention of modernity comes in the last stanza when Yeats refers to the ‘pavements grey’.

Stanza Two

In this stanza, Yeats becomes so involved with the idea of this peaceful paradise that the future tense is abandoned and he uses the present tense instead. It is almost as if, by thinking and writing about Innisfree, he imagines himself there at that moment. He tells us that ‘peace comes dropping slow,’ and ‘midnight’s all a glimmer’. He moves through each stage of the day, bringing his vision to life for us with his vivid descriptions and beautiful imagery. The description of the day’s rhythm makes us feel that this is a never-ending cycle of sensual pleasure. In the morning, the mist is like veils thrown over the lake; at noon, the purple heather – which gives the island its name - blazes under the sun; the evening is full of the whirr of the linnet’s wings (the linnet is a small songbird) and at night, the stars fill the sky: ‘midnight’s all a glimmer’. The sounds in this stanza are soft and slow, creating a sense of peace and calm.

I find it interesting that Yeats chose to imagine the sound of the linnet’s wings rather than the birdsong itself. The linnet is, after all, known for its beautiful song. However, on reflection, the image Yeats has chosen conjures up a place that is so quiet that even the whirr of this tiny birds’ wings can be heard.
Stanza Three

Yeats brings us back to the opening lines in this stanza, beginning again with the words ‘I will arise and go’. The solemnity is reinforced and emphasised by this repetition, as is the strength of his longing. The alliteration and assonance in the line, ‘I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;’ emphasise the tranquillity of the scene Yeats is describing. The broad vowels in this line slow the movement of the poem; it is virtually impossible to read it aloud at a fast pace. This is appropriate for a poem centred on ideas of tranquillity and escape from the sordid, chaotic city life. In contrast to this timeless, magical, colourful island, we are reminded of Yeats’ reality at the time of writing: ‘While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey’. The colourless grey of the pavements seems dreary and depressing and we can empathise with Yeats’ yearning for the lake isle of Innisfree, a yearning he feels in ‘the deep heart’s core.’ The last line is monosyllabic, which drives home the simple strength of the message.

This poem is in the Romantic tradition in that Yeats favours the pastoral over the urban and sees the world of nature in an idealistic way. It is reminiscent of the much longer ‘Tintern Abbey’ by William Wordsworth in that both poems centre on revisiting a place which they consider to be the epitome of natural perfection and a place where a poet may – in peace and solitude – reflect on life. You should bear this in mind when reading ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ and ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ in that Yeats’ opinion and approach have altered considerably in those later poems.

Themes
The poet’s discontent, which leads him to imagine this perfect place.
A longing to go back to nature and live a self-sufficient life.
The search for peace, wisdom and truth.
What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow form the bone?
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet they were of a different kind,
The names that stilled your childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind,
But little time they had to pray
For whom the hangman's rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
Fort his Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were,
In all their loneliness and pain,
You'd cry, 'Some woman's yellow hair
Has maddened every mother's son':
They weighed so lightly what they gave
But let them be, they're dead and gone
They're with O'Leary in the grave.
Background
Yeats was inspired to write this poem as a response to the proposed closure of the Hugh Lane art gallery and by the 1913 Lockout.

Hugh Lane was Yeats’ nephew and a close friend of Lady Gregory. He had bequeathed a large collection of priceless paintings to the city of Dublin, but the corporation was unwilling to pay the cost of keeping the gallery open.

The 1913 Lockout was a long and bitter struggle between workers and employers. Workers wanted to unionise, but the employers refused to allow them to work if they joined a union. This sparked off a major industrial dispute between approximately 20,000 workers and 300 employers in Dublin. The dispute lasted from 26 August 1913 to 18 January 1914, and is often viewed as the most severe and significant industrial dispute in Irish history.

Yeats attacks the Catholic middle classes who had recently replaced the old Protestant landowners. He sees them as being overly-materialistic, narrow-minded, short-sighted, greedy and religious in name only. He laments the loss of what he sees as ‘Romantic Ireland’: a place of heroes and great bravery. Yeats believes that the Ireland of 1913 is not what those men wanted when they fought for their country’s freedom.

Summary and analysis

Stanza One
This public poem opens with Yeats directly addressing the merchant classes. His tone is contemptuous, sarcastic and bitter as he gives his personal opinion of the wealthy Catholic middle class. He sees them as miserly, greedy men who have come to the realisation that accumulating money and saying a few token prayers is all that is needed in life. Money will ensure they are comfortable in this life, and the prayers will ensure they are safe in the next life. Yeats plays with the word ‘save’ in this stanza. The merchants are saving money, but they may also be praying to save their souls. The word ‘shivering’ to describe the prayers suggests that the merchants pray out of fear rather than any sense of spirituality. The image of the men ‘fumbling’ and ‘shivering’ as they ‘pray and save’ is a negative one and portrays the merchants in a most unfavourable light.
Yeats is being deeply sarcastic when he says that the merchants have ‘come to sense’. He despises their limited views and believes that they have taken all the goodness out of life. They have ‘dried the marrow from the bone.’ This may also refer to the employers exploiting their workers.

The refrain at the end of this stanza refers to the Irish patriot John O’Leary, who died shortly before the poem was written. He was a founder of the Fenian movement, and a man for whom Yeats had great admiration. He epitomised what Yeats saw as the ideal qualities of selflessness and idealism. These qualities have died with him, in Yeats’ opinion. The refrain is repeated at the end of the subsequent stanzas, giving the poem the air of a ballad. The repetition reinforces the main message of the poem, that ‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone / It’s with O’Leary in the grave’.

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line: an iamb being an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable). This is a metre associated with ballads and thus storytelling. Here Yeats uses it to tell us a simple story in a forceful way.

**Stanza Two**

The word ‘yet’ at the start of the stanza signals a change in tone. Now Yeats has moved on to discuss those who are worthy of admiration. Yeats contrasts the selflessness of the heroes of the past with the greed of the middle classes. These dead heroes, he says, ‘were of a different kind’, and were nothing like the men who have taken over as the dominant force in the Ireland of 1913.

As children, the merchants themselves were impressed by the heroism and valour of these men. Mention of them ‘stilled’ the merchants’ ‘childhood play’, but now that they are adults, the merchants have chosen to reject the values of the men they once revered. Now they are focused only on selfish pursuits and revere money instead. The heroes of the past had ‘little time’ to pray or save because they spent all their energy fighting for a free Ireland and pursuing a noble ideal. Yeats asks rhetorically what they could have saved, implying that there is nothing left in modern Ireland worth saving as the merchants have no interest in anything but themselves and their own comforts. His cry, ‘And what, God help us, could they save?’ is a powerful one. The colloquial ‘God help us’ adds force to his heartfelt frustration. These patriots could not even save their own lives. Their efforts were doomed and ‘the hangman’s rope was spun’ for them. This suggests that there was never much hope of any end other than death, yet the men still considered the dream worth fighting for. The image of the rope being spun – almost in anticipation of their deeds – captures the inevitability of
their death and their determination to carry on despite this. The bitter refrain at the end of the stanza reinforces Yeats’ disgust at the current situation in Ireland.

Stanza Three
In this stanza Yeats continues to pose rhetorical questions, but the tone of his questioning has become even more bitter and angry than in the previous two stanzas. The repetition of ‘for this’ serves to emphasise his message. Each time he says ‘for this’, he is contrasting contemporary Irish society with a specific example from what he considered to be the country’s glorious, romantic, noble past. The examples he gives are drawn from different times in Ireland’s history. The ‘wild geese’ were Irish noblemen and soldiers who were forced to flee the country after being defeated by the British in 1690. Many of them went on to achieve fame and fortune in other countries throughout the world. Edward Fitzgerald and Wolfe Tone were leaders of a failed rebellion against the British in 1798, and they both died in prison before they could be executed. Robert Emmet led another uprising in 1803. It too failed, and he was executed by the British.

Yeats concludes that these heroes died in vain. The Ireland of 1913 is a mean-spirited, selfish, cynical, un-Romantic place and the people in it have betrayed the men who fought and died so that they could be free: ‘Was it for this that blood was shed?’

The ‘delirium of the brave’ suggests that even Yeats struggles to understand the men’s heroism. They must have been caught up in a sort of frenzy which enabled them to act so bravely and to face the might of the British army. There was never much hope of success, yet they fought on. Yet though he may not share their willingness to lay down their lives for their country, Yeats greatly admires the patriots. They represent a sort of heroic ideal that he believes died with them.

The list of heroes shows Yeats’ pride in the Anglo-Irish patriots who fought for their country. Yeats was Anglo-Irish too, and it is significant that he chose those particular examples. He is allying himself with their patriotism, and distancing himself from the Catholic middle classes who appear incapable of appreciating any sort of nobility or self-sacrifice.

Stanza Four
In the final stanza, Yeats wonders what would happen if we could recall the dead heroes to the present day. He imagines what the reaction of the merchants would be to the men who suffered so much in their quest. His answer is a gloomy one. Yeats believes that the middle
classes would view the heroes as insane and that they would believe their love of Ireland was nothing more than madness. They would be mocked and derided for their heroism by men who can see no profit in doing anything that doesn’t bring personal gain. The personification of Ireland as a woman with 'yellow hair' is typical of Irish political ballads. Their sacrifice and their willingness to die for their vision: ‘They weighed so lightly what they gave’ could not be comprehended by men who are incapable of such nobility. Those heroes were utterly selfless in their devotion to Ireland.

There is sadness and a sort of bitter resignation in the final lines of the poem. Yeats concludes that it is pointless to even try to stir the merchant classes to any sort of understanding of the past. They are so self-serving and cynical that they could never share the dream of a romantic Ireland. It is best to let the dead heroes rest in peace: ‘But let them be, they're dead and gone / They're with O'Leary in the grave’.

There is no mention of the future and no note of hope in this final stanza.

**Themes**

Yeats’ disillusionment with the greed, cynicism, selfishness and materialism of the Ireland of his time.

Idealistic view of war.

Lament for an ideal, noble, romantic Ireland and bitter disappointment with the middle classes of his time.
The Wild Swans at Coole

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty Swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?
Background
Yeats wrote this poem in 1916, when he was fifty one years of age. Coole Park, in Co. Galway was the home of Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats' friend and patron. In the poem, he reflects on how his life has changed since he was a younger man and walked ‘with a lighter tread’. In reality, Yeats had not been carefree in his youth, but for the purposes of this poem, we must suspend disbelief and take him at his word.

In 1916, Yeats' love, Maud Gonne was widowed. Her husband, Major John McBride, had been executed by the British for his part in the Easter Rising. Maud Gonne went to France to work as a nurse with the war wounded, and Yeats followed her to propose marriage once again. Once again she refused. In 1917 Yeats married Georgiana Hyde-Lees and moved into Thoor Ballylee, a tower-house near Coole Park.

Summary and analysis

Stanza One
Yeats begins the poem by describing the beauty of Coole Park in the autumn. Details such as the brimming water and the dry woodland paths bring this peaceful scene to life. The brimming water of the lake contrasts with the dry paths. It is as if the lake and its occupants represent life and growth, while the land – where Yeats stands – is barren. Autumn is linked with slowing down and dying. Does Yeats feel that, at fifty one, he is reaching the autumn years of his life? The swans are counted; there are ‘nine-and-fifty’ of them. Swans mate for life, so why is there an odd number? Is one of them, like Yeats, alone? The repeated 'm', 's' and 'l' sounds in this stanza emphasise the sense of peace and quiet. The tone of this stanza is quite detached. The descriptions are given without any obvious emotion.

Stanza Two
In the second stanza, Yeats becomes far more personal as he recalls that it is nineteen years since he first counted these swans. Although logic tells us that these are unlikely to be the same swans, we suspend disbelief and accept that this is just an artistic construct. The use of the phrase ‘come upon me’ in relation to the passing of years is an interesting one. It implies the years are unwelcome and that they are weighing the poet down. Suddenly, before Yeats can finish his counting, all the swans rise into the air. The run-on lines suggest movement and reflect the swans' flight. The onomatopoeic word ‘clamorous’ effectively captures the clapping and beating of the swans’ wings as they oar into the air. The dynamic verbs ‘mount’ and ‘scatter’, along with the description of the noise made by the
swans as they rise into the air, contrasts with the lack of energy, stillness and silence in the first stanza. The swans form a ring – a symbol of eternity – and perhaps this reminds Yeats that while he might change, the swans remain the same, and even make the same patterns in the sky every year.

**Stanza Three**
In this deeply personal stanza, the poet reflects how everything in his life has changed since he first looked at the swans on this lake. ‘All's changed’. He is not as young or as carefree as he was when he ‘Trod with a lighter tread’. His ‘heart is sore’ as he thinks of the loss of his youth and of his failed romances. The description of the swans' wings in flight, 'The bell-beat of their wings' is particularly effective here. The alliteration in 'bell-beat' captures and reinforces the steady beat of the birds' huge wings as they fly above his head.

**Stanza Four**
There is a note of envy in the fourth stanza as Yeats watches the bird ‘Unwearied still, lover by lover,’ paddling together in the ‘Companionable streams’. The streams may be cold, but the swans have one another. They are united, and time does not seem to touch them. ‘Their hearts have not grown old’. Wherever they go, ‘Passion or conquest’ are with them. This seems to be in contrast to Yeats' own life. He implies that he is old and tired and heartbroken. The swans can swim in the ‘brimming’ water and fly in the air, but Yeats is limited to the dry woodland paths.

**Stanza Five**
The poem ends with Yeats wondering where the swans will go next to ‘Delight men's eyes’. Perhaps he means that they, unchanged, will continue to bring pleasure to others who stand as he does now, watching them glide once more on the still water. They will leave him, however.

The poem is set in autumn, and winter will inevitably follow, for the poet. The swans seem untouched by everything and will continue to ‘drift on the still water'. Yeats may be thinking of his creative life or his love life, or both, when he reflects on the changes that time has wrought. The swans are unchanging, content, almost immortal. He is none of these things.

**Themes**
The passage of time, and the loss of youth, creative vision and love.
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.

Background
The Irish airman in this poem is Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory’s son. He was one of many Irishmen who fought and died for Britain in the First World War. He was shot down and killed while in Northern Italy. He was thirty seven years of age.

Yeats saw Gregory as a Renaissance man - a soldier, an artist, a horseman, a hunter, an educated aristocrat – and he admired him greatly. His death affected Yeats profoundly, and he wrote several poems for him.

Summary and analysis
This poem is an elegy in memory of Robert Gregory, who was killed during the First World War, but it is also more than that. It explores the state of mind of men who volunteered, as Gregory did, to fight in that war and examines their motivation.

The poem is structured unusually, in that it is the dead man himself who is speaking to us. Typically, an elegy would mourn the loss of the subject of the poem and list his good qualities, but this poem is different. The tone is not one of sorrow so much as fatalism. (Fatalism =
acceptance that events are predetermined by fate and, therefore, unchangeable. What will happen will happen.) The speaker is aware that he will die, yet chooses to fight, regardless of the fact. This fatalism is obvious from the opening lines:

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

The airman goes on to say that he is not motivated to fight by love of his fellow countrymen or hatred of the enemy. The tone is bleak, with no sense of passion. He has chosen to go to his death for reasons other than patriotism. There is no sense that he even supports the war effort. He feels it will not make any difference to his fellow countrymen:

No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.

In lines nine and ten, the airman makes it clear that he was not forced to fight, nor did he feel he had a duty to do so. It wasn’t the ‘cheering crowds’ which carried him away; he was not swept up in the emotion of the enlistment meetings. There is a sense of cynicism in the mention of the ‘public men’ and the ‘cheering crowds’. He has seen the realities of war and is not impressed or moved by politicians or public opinion. The repeated negatives ‘nor – nor’ emphasise the deliberate nature of his choice. He knows the reasons others may have chosen to fight, but they were not his reasons. His decision was a rational, calm one. He chose to go to war, knowing that by doing so, he had chosen his fate. He thought about it logically and intelligently: ‘I balanced all, brought all to mind,’ and made his decision. The balance of this line and the following two mirrors the balanced decision. He looked with detachment at his life to date, and at the possible future. His disenchantment with both is obvious:

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

In contrast, the ‘tumult in the clouds’ seemed to Gregory to be an adventure, an ‘impulse of delight’. Ironically, it seems that he only felt truly alive when flying towards his inevitable death. The repetition of the words ‘waste of breath’ emphasises Gregory's contempt for the dull security of life at home. He would rather die a heroic death than stay safely on his estate. Is there a sense in which the poet and the airman are alike? Both are driven by a passion for a different way of life. Both are solitary figures. The difference is that the airman chooses a life of action, of adventure.
Theme

Some see this poem as a championing of war and risk-taking; others see it as an exploration of the motivation and psychological state of those who chose to fight in the war. They were not conscripted, and they did not have any great patriotic feelings. So why did they fight and die for a country they did not love against an enemy they did not hate? Yeats seems to say that it is the excitement, the thrill of the ‘tumult’ which led to so many Anglo-Irishmen losing their lives during the war. The impulse which drove them was a ‘lonely’ one. They were doing this for themselves, not for anyone else.
Easter 1916

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our wingèd horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;  
He, too, has resigned his part  
In the casual comedy;  
He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.  
The horse that comes from the road,  
The rider, the birds that range  
From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
Minute by minute they change;  
A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse plashes within it;  
The long-legged moor-hens dive,  
And hens to moor-cocks call;  
Minute by minute they live:  
The stone’s in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice  
Can make a stone of the heart.  
O when may it suffice?  
That is Heaven’s part, our part  
To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child  
When sleep at last has come  
On limbs that had run wild.

What is it but nightfall?  
No, no, not night but death;  
Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Background

A group of nationalist rebels, led by Padraig Pearse and James Connolly, staged a small military insurrection in Dublin on Easter Sunday 1916 and declared an Irish Republic. It was a Republic in name only, as most of Ireland remained uninvolved in the uprising. The British army, distracted by the war raging on the continent, eventually responded with a week-long bombardment of the rebel forces. The main building held by the rebels was the central Post Office, and it has been a symbol of Irish nationalism ever since. By the end of the week the rebels had been defeated, and the last remaining insurgents surrendered. Much of the city was in ruins, and Dublin's citizens blamed the rebels for the destruction. However, after many of the rebels were executed, and Britain threatened conscription of the Irish for the war against Germany, popular opinion shifted towards the deceased and imprisoned rebels, and Easter became a symbolic starting point for the Irish Republic. This led to the war for independence, and thus Easter 1916 is seen as the first step towards Irish autonomy.

Yeats personally knew many of the participants in the uprising. He himself was out of the country at the time, and the poem’s tone of belatedness reflects Yeats’ alienation from the important events of Easter week. The poem reminds the reader that he did not take part in the rising, and can only ‘write it out in verse.’ The poem should be viewed as a commemoration of the event, but one cannot ignore Yeats’ troubled attitude towards the uprising. Although he describes the rebels as ‘transformed utterly’ into heroes, he also wonders, ‘Was it needless death after all?’ The sense of belatedness also stems from the insurgents having appropriated the role of literature: during that week they created an imaginary nation, so all poetry can do is re-create this action.

A good comparison is with Yeats’s previous poem, ‘September 1913,’ which is similar
in tone, title, and structure. ‘Easter 1916’ is a palinode to ‘September 1913,’ announcing a change in attitude towards the Irish nationalists. In the previous poem he was patronising towards their efforts, especially in the famous line ‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone / It’s with O’Leary in the grave.’ ‘Easter 1916’ shows far more respect to their endeavour, even if the praise is somewhat qualified.

Summary and analysis

Section One
The poem opens with Yeats recalling his meeting some of those who would later be involved in the 1916 Rising. At that time, he did not take such people seriously. They seemed to him to be unremarkable men leading very ordinary lives. They worked all day at ‘counter or desk’ emerging from the ‘eighteenth-century houses’ where they worked. Their faces are ‘vivid’, in contrast to the grey of the buildings. The buildings were constructed during the British reign, and Yeats may be comparing the quiet elegance and restraint of the aristocratic world of the Anglo-Irish and British to the brash, gaudy world of these new patriots whom he despised. He believed they were only playing at being revolutionaries and would never do anything meaningful in their struggle for an Irish republic.

Yeats thought little of these people, not considering them worthy of his time. He often laughed at them when at his club, believing them to be fools. The reference to ‘motley’ means mixed colours, such as were worn by mediaeval jesters. This is in keeping with the view Yeats expresses in 1913 when he condemns the new middle classes and the rising dominance of what he sees as men unworthy to take a leading role in Irish politics or society. Occasionally Yeats would give more than a polite ‘nod’ and would engage in conversation. But even while speaking to these men, he would be storing up a ‘mocking tale or gibe’ to tell his friends at the club.

As in ‘September 1913’, there is a refrain at the end of the opening section which is repeated throughout the poem. The refrain shows Yeats’ shock at the occurrences of Easter 1916. The people he mocked and considered foolish and powerless rose up against the British, and many of them lost their lives as a result. He must now face the fact that he was completely wrong in scorning the new revolutionaries and thinking they were incapable of any sort of heroism. The men he despised have become like the dead patriots he revered. The similarity between the two poems is deliberate. In this palinode, Yeats is reminding us that he expressed his distaste for the new breed of Irishman, but he acknowledges now that he completely misjudged them. Another interesting point is the way the poem is structured:
there are 16 lines (for 1916) in the first and third stanzas, 24 lines (for April 24, the date the Rising began) in the second and fourth stanzas, and four stanzas in total (which refers to April, the fourth month of the year).

The ‘beauty’ of this heroism is not without a cost. The oxymoron ‘terrible beauty’ is Yeats’ attempt to reconcile the heroism and the bravery of the Rising with the brutal death and execution of many of the participants. Yeats sees the complexity of the Rising, and he does not attempt to portray it as an entirely romantic or glorious event.

**Section Two**
In the second section of the poem, Yeats describes some of the leaders of the Easter Rising. He knew these people personally, and gives his honest opinion of them. The first person he describes is Countess Markievicz – formerly Constance Gore-Booth. His initial description of her is not flattering. He believe that she was well-intentioned but misguided: ‘ignorant goodwill’. Her voice is ‘shrill’ from nights spent ‘in argument’, and Yeats seems to feel that her political views descended into a sort of hysterical fanaticism. However, he also remembers how she had a sweet voice ‘When young and beautiful / She rode to harriers’. It appears that Yeats would have preferred her to stay on her estate in Lissadell, remaining a symbol of beauty and elegance instead of becoming involved in militant nationalism.

The second person Yeats describes in Patrick Pearse, a teacher and poet. The ‘winged horse’ he rode is a reference to Pegasus, a figure in mythology which represents poetry. Next, Yeats talks about Pearse’s ‘helper and friend’ Thomas MacDonagh, who was a poet, English lecturer, and dramatist. Yeats feels that Mac Donagh was a man who could have gone on to great things in the literary world: ‘He might have won fame in the end’. The description of MacDonagh as ‘sensitive’ and with thoughts ‘so daring and sweet’ makes him seem less suited to warfare than to literary pursuits.

The final person in this list is the most interesting. John MacBride married Maud Gonne, the woman Yeats loved for many years, despite her repeated refusal to marry him. Yeats despised MacBride, calling him a ‘drunken, vainglorious lout’ and alluding to his violence towards his wife and her daughter Iseult: ‘did most bitter wrong / To some who are near my heart’. However, the word ‘dreamed’ tells us that Yeats now knows that his view of MacBride was not a complete one and that MacBride too has been ‘changed’ by his part in the Easter Rising. He has ‘resigned his part in the casual comedy’ of life and has become a hero.
This reference to the ‘casual comedy’ reminds us of Yeats’ earlier view of men like MacBride; men he laughed at and believed to be part of a society ‘where motley is worn’. This second mention of it seems to say that although there are parts of Irish life that are ridiculous and not worthwhile, these men have ‘resigned’ from that and have achieved something magnificent.

**Section Three**

This section analyses the impact of the Rising and the type of people who played their part in it. Such men are like stones in a stream, standing firm against the flow of public opinion. They are devoted to ‘one purpose alone’ and are somehow under the spell of their dream, or ‘Enchanted’ by it. The events of 1916 are an unchangeable reality in the middle of an ever changing world. They have transcended time and their deeds will mark an important place in Irish history. All of the images of nature in this section are connected with movement and change. Birds fly ‘from cloud to tumbling cloud’ and a horse splashes through the stream while moor hens dive. The repetition of ‘minute by minute’ reminds us that this change is constant. Nothing stays the same.

(The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus used the idea of water – a river – to suggest change. He said that no man can stand in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.)

**Section Four**

The final stanza continues the imagery of hearts of stone. Men who devote themselves entirely to one purpose can become incapable of engaging with the lively, colourful world Yeats describes in the third section. They have sacrificed the other aspects of their lives and are totally committed to the cause. Yeats does not judge them for this, saying that it is ‘Heaven’s part’ to decide whether the men were right or wrong. Our only duty is to remember these men and keep their names alive by speaking of them. In a beautiful and gentle image, Yeats compares those who have died to a child falling asleep after great exertion. He continues to explore this idea, wondering if their fate was really like falling asleep at night. He quickly says that it was not, and that we cannot soften the reality of their brutal deaths by cloaking them in metaphor.

Yeats then considers the possibility that these men died for nothing because England had promised to grant Home Rule to Ireland after the war was over. Were they misguided? However, the important thing, he decides, is that they had a dream and they deserve their place in history. Their names are listed, just as the names of the heroes of the past were...
listed in ‘September 1913’. They will live on in verse, and now people wear ‘green’ instead of ‘motley’. Still, it cannot be forgotten that this wearing of the green has come at a ‘terrible’ price.

Themes

The impact of the Easter Rising, and Yeats’ attitude towards those who took part in it.

The nature of war – its ability to make people into heroes, but also the terrible cost of such heroism.

The notion of life being in a permanent state of change and the almost unnatural determination of the rebels to stand against the change.
Sailing to Byzantium

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees.
-Those dying generations – at their song,
-The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God’s holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.
Glossary

**Byzantium:** The city now known as Istanbul (formerly Constantinople). It was known as Byzantium from 660 B.C. until 330 A.D.

Yeats never visited Byzantium, but did see mosaics from there in other cities he had visited. In *A Vision*, Yeats wrote: 'I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers ... spoke to the multitude and the few alike.'

**Soul clap its hands and sing:** The poet William Blake, witnessing his brother's death, remarked that he saw his brother's soul "ascend heavenward clapping its hands for joy".

**Perne in a gyre:** The word ‘perne’ is one that Yeats constructed from the Scottish word ‘pirn’ meaning a spool or bobbin. A gyre is a conical spiral. Yeats had a theory of the universe/civilisation which centred around the idea of gyres. I will do my best to explain it to you in class as it would take up too much space in these notes.

Summary and analysis

**Stanza One**

Like *The Wild Swans at Coole*, this is a poem in which Yeats explores his personal life and his thoughts on ageing, longing and failure. We are also reminded of ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ in that Yeats longs to leave this imperfect world and travel to a place of beauty and contentment. In ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’, however, Yeats sought perfection in the natural world. Now the natural world is rejected in favour of the world of art and civilisation. In this metaphorical journey, Yeats imagines himself ‘Sailing’ to Byzantium. The word ‘Sailing’ conjures up images of timeless grace and elegance.

Yeats believes that the Ireland in which he lives is no place for an old man like himself. He distances himself from it in the very first line, calling it ‘That’ country rather than ‘this’ country. All he can see around him is young people having fun and enjoying themselves. Even nature seems to be full of vitality and warmth. It is summer, and nature’s bounty and beauty is everywhere. The birds are singing in the trees, young lovers are revelling in the pleasure of each other’s physical presence and even the rivers and seas are full of life. Yeats is disenchanted and feels that there is no place for him in a world dominated by youth and vigour.
Even in all of this life, however, the poet sees seeds of death and old age. Everything will die eventually: ‘Whatever is begotten, born and dies’. The young people have no concern for their mortality, of course. They are living in the moment. Yeats may envy their sensuality and their lack of concern as they ‘commend’ the cycle of life. However, the young people, Yeats believes, are consumed with ‘sensual music’ and are so caught up in their physical pleasures that they ‘neglect monuments of unageing intellect’, that is to say, literature and the arts in general. Physical things are transient, but art lives forever. The arts are so important to the poet that he cannot understand the young people’s lack of interest in them.

**Stanza Two**

Yeats dwells on the effects of time on the human body. He sees himself as being like a scarecrow, with his flesh hanging on his bones like a ‘tattered coat’. Note that as the poem progresses; Yeats views his ageing body increasingly harshly. He moves from being one of the ‘old men’ to being ‘a tattered coat upon a stick’ and then, most shockingly, ‘a dying animal’ in the third stanza.

However, even if he is old, Yeats knows that there is more to the human condition than physicality. He also has a soul, which never ages. As the body ages, so the poet should concentrate on using his soul properly, and make it ‘sing’ loudly in celebration of its impending freedom. After all, when the body dies, the soul will be truly free. The sibilance and repetition in the line in which Yeats urges his soul to sing: ‘Soul clap its hands and sing and louder sing’ add to the sense of urgency and highlight the poet’s desire and despair.

While the soul is contained within the human body, it can be nourished by being exposed to great works of arts. Such works are products of the soul, not of the body. This is why they are referred to as physical examples of the soul’s ‘own magnificence’.

Yeats decides to leave Ireland with all its youthful vitality and lack of interest in the soul, and travel to the ancient city of Byzantium, where his soul can thrive.

**Stanza Three**

In this prayer-like stanza, Yeats asks that his body be destroyed so that his soul can be free. He thinks about a work of Byzantine art which shows wise men or ‘sages’ being burned alive, and he appeals to them to come and teach him. He asks them to spin through the vortex of time and show him how to be like them and focus entirely on the soul. The gold mosaic in line is probably a mosaic that Yeats saw in San Apollinaire Nuovo, Ravenna. It depicts a row of saints against a gold backdrop.
The poet is filled with the same longings he had as a young man, but because his heart is ‘fastened to a dying animal’ he cannot fulfil these desires. His heart is trapped in his old body and ‘it knows not what it is’. Yeats calls on the sages who are preserved forever in the gold mosaic to come and save him. He asks them to burn his heart away so that he will no longer be confined to his body but will instead be able to become permanent and timeless.

Yeats is more than likely referring to the phoenix in this stanza when he asks that his body be burnt away. The phoenix is a mythological bird that deliberately burns when it is near the end of its life. From the ashes it is reborn in the shape of a young phoenix. This way it lives forever. The song of the phoenix is also said to be beautiful, which is in keeping with the song imagery running throughout the poem.

**Stanza Four**
The poet wants his soul to be embodied in a piece of art of ‘hammered gold and gold enamelling’. The reference to ‘Grecian goldsmiths’ reminds us of another civilisation famous for art, philosophy and literary works.

He may take the form of a bird, and in this form he would spend his time singing to the lords and ladies. Ironically, now that he is no longer bound by the passing of time, the subject of his songs will be ‘what is past, or passing, or to come’. The existence portrayed in this stanza is far from ideal, however. There is a contrast between the vitality of the natural images in the first stanza and the rather dull image of the sculpted bird who sings to ‘keep a drowsy emperor awake’. Art may have some advantages over real life, but it does seem rather cold and uninspiring at the same time. We wonder if the poet could be truly happy in this state.

**Themes**

- The transience of life and the nature of change.
- The contrast between the perfect, timeless world of art and the imperfect world of nature.

In *A Vision* Yeats wrote that “I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic, and practical life were one.” One approach to this poem would be to trace the intertwining of these three aspects of life. Although the poem seems to celebrate a realm of pure aesthetics, there are philosophical ideas in it as well: the immortality of art may be merely a metaphor for the immortality of the soul, as some critics have argued.
Approaching the Poetry Essay

• Marks: There are 50 marks for this section.

• Time: You should allow about 45/50 minutes for this section.

• You are required to study approximately six poems by each of the poets on your course. You are not expected to refer to all six in the same level of detail in your answer. Use your discretion. You may be desperate to show how hard you have studied and how much you know, but you risk losing marks by including material which is not relevant to the question.

• Everything you have learned about structuring essays should be brought into play here. This is not an exercise in proving to the examiner that you have studied your poems and learned your quotes – it is an opportunity for you to show that you can frame an argument based on the title given. This means that you must have a thesis. This is your interpretation of the title, and it tells the reader the direction your essay is going to take.

• Your answer should take up at approximately four to five pages of your answer booklet.

• Plan your answer carefully. Check your plan before you write. Does each point answer the question? Have you stayed focused?

• Make your point, develop it and support it with suitable quotation.

• Use link words and phrases between paragraphs to ensure the coherence of your essay: However, Therefore, In a similar manner, Like (name poem), (next poem) also deals with the issue of...

Remember:
THEMES
STYLE
PERSONAL RESPONSE
Here is my sample opening for an essay on Emily Dickinson:

Of all the poets on my Leaving Cert course, Emily Dickinson is the one whose work holds the most appeal for me. When I first read her poems, I have to admit that I found them a little off-putting, but the more I studied them, the more I began to appreciate her unique vision and her memorable, idiosyncratic style. What strikes me most about Dickinson's poetry is the intensity of her emotions, whether she is describing a mental breakdown in 'I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain', facing death in 'I heard a Fly buzz – when I died-' or, at the other end of the scale, offering us comfort in 'Hope' is the thing with feathers' and outright celebration and joy in 'I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed'. I am intrigued that a poet who can write about mental anguish and mortality in such dreadful detail in one poem can also lift my spirits with her charming, playful depiction of a summer's day in another. In this essay, I will discuss the way in which Emily Dickinson manages to bring me with her on her journey from the depths of despair to the heights of ecstasy.

My essay then goes on to deal with the poems in a logical order, based on my thesis. I begin with the most depressing poem and end with the most uplifting. This ensures that my essay a) sticks to the thesis, and b) is well-structured.
Suggested Essay Structure

There is no hard and fast rule here; you should use any structure that works for you. However, if you struggle to know where to begin, here is one way of approaching the essay:

**Introduction:** Refer to the question and outline the approach you intend to take in your answer.

**Poem One:** Two paragraphs

**Poem Two:** Link Sentence to Poem One

Two paragraphs on Poem Two

**Poem Three:** Link Sentence to Poem Two

Two paragraphs on Poem Three

**Etc:** I would advise you to deal with four or five poems in an essay. You may wish to make brief mention of another poem, but be careful that you do not end up giving a superficial account of several poems rather than an in-depth treatment of a few.

*Where possible, try to make comparative links between your chosen poems.*

**Conclusion:** A brief summary of the main points of your essay. End on a strong note (a quote is useful here.)

Again, try to organise your poems in some sort of logical order. Here are some ideas:

1. Move from poems written about the poet's childhood to poems written about middle age or old age.

2. Move from poems written when the poet was young to poems written when he/she was an older person. (This approach works well for Yeats.)

3. Move from positive to negative or vice versa.

4. Move from personal to public or vice versa.

It honestly does not matter which approach you take, and I am sure you can come up with even better ideas of your own. The suggestions above are intended as a starting point.
Organising Your Poems in Terms of Theme and Style

For many years, the questions were asked in quite a predictable way. Students were simply required to write a personal response to the poet: ‘The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop appeals to the modern reader for many reasons.’ Write an essay in which you outline why the poems by Elizabeth Bishop have this appeal. - 2002

However, in recent years, the questions have become more focused: ‘Elizabeth Bishop poses interesting questions delivered by means of a unique style.’ Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Your answer should focus on both themes and stylistic features. Support your point with the aid of suitable reference to the poems you have studied. - 2009

The main thing to remember is that, no matter how the questions are phrased, they are all basically asking you to do the same thing – talk about the poet’s themes and style. Each question also requires you to prove that you have engaged with your chosen poems.

Look at these questions from the 2011 Leaving Cert Paper. You will see that they all deal with (a) one or more of the poet’s main themes, and (b) the poet’s style.

1. Emily Dickinson

‘Emily Dickinson’s original approach to poetry results in startling and thought-provoking moments in her work.’

Give your response to the poetry of Emily Dickinson in the light of this statement. Support your points with suitable reference to the poems on your course.

2. William Butler Yeats

‘Yeats can be a challenging poet to read, both in terms of style and subject matter.’

To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.
It can be very helpful to make a list of the poet's themes and each poem in which these themes are covered. How you do this is up to you, of course.

See the example I have started below, using W.B. Yeats' poetry:

**Ireland**
September 1913
Easter 1916

**Youth and old age**
The Wild Swans at Coole
Sailing to Byzantium

**Escape or longing**
Sailing to Byzantium
An Irish Airman Foresees His Death
The Lake Isle of Innisfree
September 1913 (wishes Ireland were different)

**Nature**
The Wild Swans at Coole
The Lake Isle of Innisfree
Sailing to Byzantium

**Change**
The Wild Swans at Coole
Sailing to Byzantium
Easter 1916

This is only a rough guideline. You may wish to organise your poems differently, perhaps starting with each individual poem and saying what themes it deals with. You may also wish to do the same for aspects of Yeats' style. Consider the organisation a work in progress. Add to it as you study or revise your poems.
Yeats – Approaching the Essay

1. “Yeats can be a challenging poet to read, both in terms of style and subject matter.”
To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry on your course. (2011 SEC)

Candidates are free to agree and/or disagree with the statement, but they should engage with Yeats’s poetry as “challenging”. Expect candidates to refer to “style” and “subject matter”, though not necessarily equally.

Material might be drawn from the following:
- allusions/imagery make Yeats’s philosophical poetry demanding
- conversational style illuminates universal themes – beauty, nature, love
- distinctive style explores abstract concepts of mortality, art, transience
- personal approach to Irish politics is accessible/challenging
- readers engaged by rhetoric, symbols, contrasts, dramatic language

2. “Yeats’s poetry is driven by a tension between the real world in which he lives and an ideal world that he imagines.”
Write a response to the poetry of W.B. Yeats in the light of this statement, supporting your points with suitable reference to the poems on your course. (2010 SEC)

Reward responses that show clear evidence of engagement with the “real world” and “ideal world” in the poetry of W. B. Yeats. Allow that “driven by a tension” may be addressed implicitly or explicitly.

Material might be drawn from the following:
- conflicting views/visions of culture, history, politics
- beauty and art offer escape from reality/disillusionment
- intensity of changing spiritual/personal perspectives
- juxtaposition of symbols, sounds, contrasting tones
- poetry driven by nuanced themes, dramatic language
“Yeats's poetry is driven by a tension between the real world in which he lives and an ideal world that he imagines.”

Tension between reality and an imagined ideal is at the heart of Yeats’ poetry. Whether he is yearning to escape the city and seek sanctuary in the peaceful perfection of Innisfree, bemoaning his ageing body in ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ and ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, expressing disillusionment with contemporary Ireland in ‘September 1913’ or admitting that the reality of patriotic rebellion is far from the ideal in ‘Easter 1916’; Yeats expresses himself with such passion and strength of conviction that we are swept along with him as he constantly reinvents himself and adjusts his opinions to reflect the changing reality in his personal life and the social and political turmoil of his native land.

When thinking of Yeats and the notion of conflict between the real world and the ideal, ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ immediately springs to mind. Yeats wrote this poem when living in London, a city he described as ‘hateful’. Standing on the ‘pavements grey’ and longing to escape this unpleasant reality, Yeats conjures up such a powerful image of his ideal that his vision almost becomes real for us as well as for him. The opening line of the poem: ‘I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree’ echoes the words of the Prodigal Son in the bible as he expressed his desire to return to his father’s house: a metaphor for heaven. In this way, the Lake Isle is given heavenly status.

As Yeats goes on to describe the rural idyll he envisions, he slips from the future tense into the present, giving the impression that he is now there, in spirit at least. The sensuous imagery allows us to share his dream; we can see the misty ‘veils of morning’ and the ‘purple glow’ of the heather under the noonday sun. The peacefulness of the Lake Isle is such that even the whirr of ‘linnet’s wings’ can be heard. It is hard not to share Yeats’ longing for this utopia, and the beautifully alliterative and assonant description of ‘lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore’ sets the seal on the island’s perfection. The broad vowels in this line make it virtually impossible to read aloud at a fast pace, which is appropriate for a poem centred on ideas of tranquillity and escape from the sordid, chaotic city life. In contrast to
this timeless, magical, colourful ideal, we are reminded of Yeats’ reality at the time of writing: ‘While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey’. This rather depressing image and the simple, monosyllabic last line, ‘I hear it in the deep heart’s core’, emphasise Yeats’ overwhelming longing to escape to a place where he can be truly at peace with himself and the world around him.

‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ is in the Romantic tradition in that the poet favours the pastoral over the urban and sees the peace and solitude of nature as the epitome of perfection. Here, the poet may reflect on life and the inference is that this will be a happy time for him. However, on reading ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ and ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ it is obvious that Yeats' opinion and approach have altered considerably over time. That is partly because his situation has changed – he has aged – and he now views nature less as a means of escape and more of a symbol of what he has lost.

In ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ a middle-aged Yeats stands alone at the edge of a lake – in a scenario that he would no doubt have seen as ideal when he was in his younger, Romantic phase – but he derives little pleasure from this imperfect reality now. The ‘brimming water’ of the lake contrasts with the dry paths. It is as if the lake and its occupants represent an ideal of life and growth while the land – where Yeats stands – represents a barren, lifeless reality. Does he feel that, at fifty one, he is reaching the autumn years of his life? He appears to envy the swans their vigour and their companionship, which contrast with his solitude and awareness of his ageing body. His use of the phrase ‘come upon me’ when describing the passage of nineteen years since he first made his count suggests that the years are unwelcome and are weighing the poet down. Time has been kinder to the swans; they are ‘unwearied still’ as, ‘lover by lover, / They paddle in the cold / Companionable streams’. This oxymoron describing the streams is an interesting one. The streams may be cold, but the swans have one another and are therefore warmed by such closeness. The contrast between this ideal of ‘hearts that have not grown old’ and Yeats own situation is clear. While he is limited to the dry woodland paths, they can go wherever they wish and ‘passion or conquest’ will ‘Attend upon them still’.

Yeats’ journey from youth to old age and the accompanying adjustment of his imagined ideal is crystal clear in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. In ‘The Lake Isle’ he longed to leave this imperfect
world and seek perfection in the natural world. Now, however, this notion is rejected in favour of the world of art and civilisation.

The Ireland in which Yeats lives is no place for an old man like himself. He is disenchanted by the reality of a world dominated by youth and vigour; all living things appear ‘Caught in that sensual music’. By contrast, Yeats sees his ageing body as a scarecrow with the flesh hanging on his bones like a ‘tattered coat upon a stick’. He views himself increasingly harshly as the poem progresses until, in the third stanza, he asks the ‘sages in God’s holy fire’ to consume his heart away as it is ‘sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal’. This is one of the most powerful, shocking and haunting images I have ever encountered in a poem and it perfectly encapsulates the dichotomy between Yeats’ reality and his imagined ideal; in this case to be gathered into ‘the artifice of eternity’. He sees the natural world as a place where life is transient; if he were to be transformed into a golden bird he would at least be immortal, even if his existence would serve little purpose other than ‘to keep a drowsy emperor awake’. I find the progression of bird imagery in the poems I have mentioned an interesting one. In ‘The Lake Isle’ the linnet is part of the imagined ideal; in ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ the birds are reminders of how the poet is affected by the passage of time while they are not, and in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ the ‘birds in the trees’ are now part of ‘That country’ which Yeats has utterly rejected.

It is not just in the realm of the personal that Yeats’ poetry expresses tension between reality and an imagined ideal. In ‘September 1913’, the poet rails against the cynicism and materialism of the Irish merchant classes as they ‘fumble in a greasy till’, while at the same time he laments the loss of the ‘Romantic Ireland’: an era of brave, selfless, patriotic heroes. These patriots ‘for whom the hangman’s rope was spun’ were doomed from the outset, yet they refused to accept their lot and considered death a risk worth taking in pursuit of their dream. It is easy to see how the idealistic Yeats would admire such men. The bitter refrain: ‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone, / It’s with O’Leary in the grave’ reinforces Yeats’ disgust with the current situation in Ireland. The patriots of old represent a sort of heroic ideal – a ‘delirium of the brave’ that Yeats believes died with them.

‘Easter 1916’ is a palinode to ‘September 1913’, announcing a change in attitude towards the Irish nationalists as Yeats is forced to accept that they were willing to fight for an ideal and attempt to make it a reality. However, his praise of these men is qualified as he sees that the fight for freedom is not quite as romantic as he had imagined, when seen without filter of history. The oxymoron ‘terrible beauty’ is Yeats’ attempt to reconcile the heroic idealism and bravery of the Rising with the bitter facts, which are the brutal death and execution of
many of its participants. He is even willing to accept that his previous view of men like
McBride might have been not all that Yeats ‘dreamed’ he was when he was consumed with
the vision of a ‘Romantic Ireland’ and he must face up to the fact that real-life freedom
fighters cannot be viewed through rose-tinted glasses. Ultimately, however, he
acknowledges that these men fought and died for an ideal and that they had a huge impact
on Irish political life. I find it fascinating to see Yeats volte-face when his dreams and reality
clash. As he did with the heroes of old in ‘September 1913’, Yeats lists the names of these
‘new’ heroes in ‘Easter 1916’ in an effort to undo some of the wrongs he had done them in his
earlier work.

I am sure that ‘Easter 1916’ will feature heavily in newspaper editorials and online articles in
two years’ time, when the hundredth anniversary of the Rising takes place. And I am equally
sure that, just as Yeats did with patriots of old, so will modern commentators view those 20th
century patriots as an ideal whose likes will not be seen again. That, I believe, is why Yeats’
poetry resonates so powerfully with us, a full seventy five years after his death. It is part of
the human condition to constantly strive for and dream of better things, and there are few
who have ever managed to express that with such force and lyrical beauty as W.B. Yeats.
Sample Essay 2 - Yeats

Note: This sample answer is taken from the Forum Publications ‘This is Poetry 2011’ book. Forum Poetry books no longer contain sample answers, but their poetry notes are excellent and comprehensive. I highly recommend them.

I have included this essay as I think it is a good example of what can go wrong when a student chooses to write in negative terms. Remember, you have a choice of four poets on the day. The examiner would be justified in wondering why you chose to write about the one you disliked the most. They may conclude that you were not familiar enough with the work of the other poets on the exam to write an essay on them.

The annotations are my own. A. O’D.

Why I do or do not like the poetry of W.B. Yeats.

There are two main reasons why the poetry of W.B. Yeats never appealed to me on a personal level: his focus on old age, and his negative view of ordinary Irish people. In this essay, I will discuss each of these reasons for disliking the poet’s work.

Yeats’ poetry is overwhelmingly concerned with old age and with the process of ageing. We see this in ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ where the poet contemplates the swans floating upon the lake in Coole Park:

Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine and fifty swans

To the poet, it seems as if the swans have not aged or changed in the nineteen years since he first visited this place. They seem ‘Unwearied still’. As he gazes at these seemingly unchanging creatures, he is struck by the fact that he has aged himself, that he no longer walks with the ‘lighter tread’ of youth.

It could be argued that a similar moment of realisation occurs in
‘Politics’, where the poet is mesmerised by the sight of a beautiful girl who is standing there. The poet wishes he could somehow be young again so that he could be this woman’s lover: ‘O that I were young again / And held her in my arms’. A similar point is made in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, where the old poet laments the fact that he has become excluded from the joys of love and sex. The world of physical passion and joyous reproduction is, he declares, ‘no country for old men’.

‘Sailing to Byzantium’ also depicts the physical decay that accompanies old age. The aged poet describes himself as a ‘paltry thing / A tattered coat upon a stick’. A similar note is struck by the poem ‘In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz’ which laments the fact that old age has transformed the Gore-Booth sisters. They are no longer ‘two girls in silk kimonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle’, but have become worn and withered with the passing of years. They end up ‘withered old and skeleton gaunt’. ‘An Acre of Grass’ also deals with ageing and physical decline as the poet mourns the fact that his ‘strength of body goes’ as he approaches ‘life’s end’.

It is fair to say, then, that in poem after poem, Yeats tackles the regrets and difficulties of growing older. I am sure his portrayal of these issues is accurate, and that many people, on old age is more or less totally irrelevant and even a little depressing. Like most seventeen-year-olds, I do not obsess about my decaying ‘with every tatter in its mortal dress’. The regretful realisation of an old man that he is no longer attractive to young women is something I have great difficulty connecting with. Yeats may feel nostalgic because the ‘nineteenth autumn has come upon’ him since he first visited Coole Park. But I haven’t experienced ‘nineteen autumns’ in my whole life! I think, therefore, that I will be forgiven if I say that this aspect of Yeats’ poetry leaves me cold and uninterested. Perhaps my opinion of these poems will change when I myself am older.
Another aspect of Yeats’ poetry I dislike is his snobbish contempt for what might be described as the plain and ordinary people of Ireland. We see this in ‘Under Ben Bulben’, where he longs for an Ireland that resembles a medieval fantasy more than a modern twentieth-century nation:

Sing the peasantry and then
Hard riding country gentlemen
The holiness of monks and after
Porter drinkers randy laughter

Yeats wants Ireland to be a country run by landlords who reside in mansions like Lissadell, as described in ‘In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz’. These gentlemen—presumably from Yeats’ own Protestant Ascendancy Class—would ride through the fields supervising the jolly peasants working there. This, it seems, is the romantic Ireland whose loss Yeats laments in ‘September 1913’. I wonder, however, if such an Ireland ever existed or if it is just a Yeatsian fantasy.

There is no place in Yeats’ fantasy Ireland for ‘normal’ modern people who work in shops or businesses. These are the ‘sort now growing up/ All out of shape from toe to top’ and must be treated with contempt.

A similar contempt for ordinary people is evident in ‘September 1913’ where Yeats absolutely cuts loose in a vitriolic attack on the middle-class Catholics of Dublin. These middle-class people have lost their way. He depicts them as mean and tight-fisted bigots who ‘fumble in a greasy till’ for a few pennies. He also criticises their religious devotion, which he regards as somewhat hypocritical and superficial. The Catholic middle classes, he declares, pray more out of fear than genuine spiritual devotion. They add ‘prayer to shivering prayer’.

Yet we might ask if Yeats’ venomous attack is really merited. The people he attacks are ordinary businessmen and shopkeepers trying to make their way in the world. Their only ‘crime’ was to refuse to sponsor Yeats’ pet project, a gallery for the painting donated to the Hugh Lane gallery, but at the same time he made tram-workers in his company work 17 hours a day for low wages and only gave them one day off in ten. He punished them severely for joining trade unions. Surely the starving workers could be considered the real ‘ordinary people’?
state by Hugh Lane. A similar contempt for the ordinary people of Ireland is evident in ‘Easter 1916’ where Yeats can barely hide his scorn for the ordinary workers who organised and led the rising. For years he mocked these patriots, regarding them as foolish and confused:

And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at a club

This image, of Yeats and his well-heeled companions snickering at Patrick Pearse behind his back, is one that really turns me off his work. There is a real sense here that Yeats looks down on those patriots because they are from a lower social class than him. They come from the same Catholic middle class he attacked in ‘September 1913’, with their offices and shops and ‘grey / Eighteenth century houses’. They are not the Protestant ‘Lords and Ladies gay’ from whom Yeats would expect heroism. It must be admitted, however, that Yeats has the grace to change his mind about the 1916 leaders. He comes to accept that they have been ‘transformed utterly’ by their heroic revolt.

In conclusion, I hope that I have demonstrated my dislike for the poetry of Yeats, while at the same time showing that I have logical reasons for this dislike.

This weakens the point being made. If the writer wanted to make the point that Yeats was being overly-critical of these men, she/he could have focused on the rather qualified praise of men like MacBride.

If you are going to attack a literary icon, make sure to do so in a grammatically correct manner. This should read, ‘…they are from a lower social class than he.’ The verb ‘to be’ takes the nominative case. Pedantic? Possibly. But remember that if you go into a fight with one of the great men of Irish literature, one of you is going to come out of that fight looking foolish. It’s unlikely to be Yeats.

This sentence is very poorly constructed. A better approach would have been: ‘In conclusion, I hope that I have demonstrated my dislike for the poetry of Yeats, while at the same time showing that I have logical reasons for this dislike.’

Neither approach would detract from the whiny tone, however.