September 1913

POEM TEXT

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 from 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 had they 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,
For this 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.

SUMMARY

What else could you possibly need to do, having come to your senses, besides drop some coins into the dirty register and make weak little prayers until you've shriveled up and died? After all, that's what life's about: praying and saving. The dream of a truly "Irish" national culture is over, buried alongside the Irish revolutionary John O'Leary (who died in 1907).

Revolutionaries like O'Leary were made of different stuff than you are. Hearing their names made you stop playing and listen when you were a child. They fluttered all around the world but didn't have much time for prayer, those men whose lives were cut short when they were hanged (i.e., as traitors by the English authorities). And, oh God, it's not like they were able to save anything, is it? Their dream for Ireland is over, buried alongside John O'Leary.

Was this—the Ireland of today—why so many Irish revolutionaries went into exile abroad, like geese flying out to sea? Does this justify all those years of fighting, or the deaths of martyrs like Edward Fitzgerald, an Irish nobleman who died after an unsuccessful insurrection in 1798; Robert Emmet, who was executed after leading an uprising in 1803; or the heroic Wolfe Tone, who was also killed in 1798? What happened to all that courage, a commitment so intense it could seem almost crazy? The revolutionaries' dream for Ireland is over, buried alongside John O'Leary.

If we could turn back time and summon into the present day those revolutionaries who were tormented by the extraordinary strength of their beliefs, you would simply dismiss their passion. Instead of recognizing the depth of their convictions, you would claim that they were madly in love with some yellow-haired woman and that they had foolishly thrown their lives away. It's better to just leave those men alone and not trouble their memories: their time is past and they're dead, just like John O'Leary.

THEMES

MONEY, RELIGION, AND POLITICAL COMPLACENCY

The speaker of "September 1913" has an ax to grind with readers about the state of Irish politics. This speaker (a stand-in for the poet W.B. Yeats, a staunch Irish nationalist) contrasts their self-interested and dutifully religious countrymen with famous Irish revolutionaries who died trying to free Ireland from British rule. The poem implies that greed, materialism, and the suffocating influence of the Catholic Church have made the emerging Irish middle class complacent, both unable and unwilling to bring about the cultural and political revolution that the speaker longs for.

In a series of bitter rhetorical questions addressed directly to the reader, the speaker skewers the character of their middle-

class audience. The speaker suggests that these people have no desire for anything beyond their self-centered, workaday lives, which consist of accumulating a little money and counting the rosary. In other words, they devote their time to financial matters and fulfilling religious duties.

The small amounts of money they transact (the "halfpence" and the "pence" sorted in the "greasy" register) and the sickly "shivering prayer" they make are a pittance, resulting in neither real wealth, nor power, nor spiritual fulfillment. Basically, they're just petty, mind-numbing distractions from what really matters to the speaker. The speaker plays on a double meaning when they say, sarcastically, that "men were born to pray and save." Compared to the dream of political independence, the speaker sees little value in spending one's life saving souls or saving money.

Indeed, these pathetic priorities stand in stark contrast to the deeds of notable Irish revolutionaries like Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, and Wolfe Tone, and "the wild geese" (Irish insurgents in exile), who fought against impossible odds and died for their political beliefs. Even the most celebrated Irish martyrs ("for whom the hangman's rope was spun") had "little time [...] to pray," the speaker says, since the lives of those committed to the cause (of a free Ireland) were often cut short. Their faith was in the future of the nation—not the Church or their bank accounts. Materialism and excess piety are mere distractions from what really matters to the speaker: revolutionary change.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 23-32

THE LOSS OF IDEALISM AND ROMANTIC IRELAND

The speaker of 1913 has given up on the dream of "Romantic Ireland": a fully independent nation, rich with myth and history, and not tied to a single religion. According to the poem's refrain, this Ireland died with John O'Leary, well-known in Yeats's day for his commitment to a secular Irish state. Men like O'Leary "were of a different kind" than the speaker's contemporaries, who the poem argues do not have the vision, principles, or will to truly liberate their homeland. Their complacency, the speaker laments, fails to justify the sacrifices of those who fought and died for Ireland's independence. Even a quintessential figure of "Romantic Ireland" would go unrecognized by the speaker's contemporaries, who would look down on the idealism of those revolutionaries of old if they were alive today.

The speaker argues that their countrymen fail to measure up to the great Irish revolutionaries of the past. Those men were motivated by their ideals to travel around the world and fight against impossible odds to free Ireland. Even though they understood that they would eventually be killed, they were totally committed to the cause. They were selfless and self-sacrificing, unlike the people of modern Ireland.

What's more, the modern Irish people would probably scorn and dismiss those men for their commitment to the cause if they were around today (that is, in the poem's present). Because the speaker's audience can't fathom the old revolutionaries' love for a free Ireland, they'd criticize the men's willingness to die and condemn them for valuing their own lives so "lightly." The intense, idealistic patriotism of the past seems like outright "delirium" to the speaker's contemporaries.

To illustrate this, the speaker refers to the mythical figure Kathleen ni Houlihan, a personification of Romantic Ireland who often appears in art and literature as a beautiful, fair young woman. The speaker expects that "you" would mistake her for just "some woman" with "yellow hair" who had seduced "those exiles." "You" couldn't even recognize Kathleen ni Houlihan, let alone appreciate what she represents: the kind of idealism and sacrifice that spur revolutionary change.

The speaker's refrain ("Romantic Ireland's dead and gone") sounds like a foregone conclusion—but, by holding up a mirror to the audience's complacency, it just might be the thing that inspires them to act. The poem thus issues an implicit challenge to its readers: who might rise to the occasion and prove the speaker wrong?

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

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 from the bone;

"September 1913" begins with the first of several rhetorical questions addressed directly to the reader ("you"). Right away, the speaker's tone is aggrieved and antagonistic: this opening question is an interrogation of readers' values and principles.

Yeats has a specific audience in mind: the Irish middle class in the early 20th century, scathingly described here as "sens[ible]" folks who have no "need" apart from adding up small change and counting the rosary until they die. (In the Catholic tradition, a string of beads is sometimes used to help keep track of how

many prayers a person has said.)

It's clear from the language that the speaker looks down on these activities. They describe the till, or cash register, as "greasy," suggesting that maybe there's something ill-gotten about the money that's going inside. It's not a lot of money, either, implying that these people are both greedy and petty. The diacope of the phrase "prayer to shivering prayer," meanwhile, suggests that their religious piety is done thoughtlessly, out of dogged obligation rather than genuine faith. The readers are piling up their prayers much like they "add" coins to the "greasy till," as though trying to bank some goodwill with God. The word "shivering" further suggests that these prayers are weak, ineffective, or sickly.

Making money and putting on empty displays of piety don't count for much, as far as the speaker is concerned. In fact, they're life-sapping: the metaphor in lines 4-5 implies that a focus on material things and Christian salvation actually results in the vital "marrow" of life being dried out, leaving nothing but a hollow, brittle bone behind.

The sounds of the poem help to build its acerbic tone. For example, note how the plosive /p/ alliteration of "halfpence to the pence [...] prayer to shivering prayer" help to convey the speaker's bitter distaste.

Most of the poem also follows perfect iambic tetrameter (four-beat lines that follow the rhythm da-DUM, da-DUM), lending it a precise, snappy rhythm. The opening line, however, features a variation in the meter. The second foot here is a spondee (two stressed beats in a row). This combines with the caesura, or pause, after "you" to unsettle the reader:

> What need | you, be- | ing come | to sense

The extra emphasis on "you" implicates the audience from square one. This isn't an abstract second-person address. Again, the speaker has a particular person, or group of people, in mind.

LINES 6-8

> *For men were born to pray and save:*
> *Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,*
> *It's with O'Leary in the grave.*

In the previous lines, the speaker declared that their countrymen are preoccupied with material gain and religious commitments to the Catholic Church. This is because, the speaker continues, "men were born to pray and save."

The speaker is being sarcastic here, mocking their audience for their single-minded focus on money and dogged piety. Note, too, the subtle pun on "save," which refers both to saving *souls* (i.e., through religion) and saving *money*. The pun implies that these things are pretty much equal in the mind of the speaker's countrymen.

The colon at the end of line 6 then implies a causal relationship between what the speaker has already asserted and what's to follow. That is, lines 7-8 lay out the *result* of these shallow preoccupations: the death of "Romantic Ireland." These lines also become the poem's refrain, as the speaker will repeat them at the end of every stanza to come:

> Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
> It's with O'Leary in the grave.

What exactly is "Romantic Ireland?" "Romantic" refers to a set of artistic, literary, and philosophical ideals associated with the Romantic movement of the 19th century. The Romantics placed tremendous emphasis on individuality, intuition, personal liberty, beauty, and spiritual truth. Many Romantics shunned hierarchical forms of organized religion in favor of folk culture and mythology.

Romantic Ireland, then, is an Ireland that isn't just free from British rule, but which also has been liberated from institutions like the Catholic Church. According to the speaker, this version of Ireland no longer exists (it's "dead and gone"). Arguably, it *never* existed and was only ever a dream. Now, the speaker says, it's buried alongside the Irish separatist John O'Leary, who died in 1907 (five years before this poem was written).

LINES 9-16

> *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 had they 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.*

In line 9, the speaker introduces a group of people, "they":

> Yet they were of a different kind,

This creates some internal suspense, as readers must continue on to line 10 to discover that "they" refers to other revolutionaries like O'Leary who fought for Irish independence. Their names "stilled your childish play," meaning that these names are so powerful that even as a child, "you" couldn't help but stop and listen when you heard them mentioned. Respect for these historical figures, it seems, was instilled in the speaker's intended audience from a very young age.

The poem, however, provides few specifics about who these men were, or what they did. The speaker assumes that "O'Leary," for instance, needs no introduction; these names already had symbolic significance for an Irish-Catholic audience in 1913. But perhaps, the speaker begins to suggest, the general population didn't really understand what men like

O'Leary stood for at all.

These men "were of a different kind," with values and priorities different from those of the speaker's contemporaries. For instance, many Irish nationalists went abroad to recruit others to their cause or were sent into exile by the English. The speaker describes this with a simile, saying, "They have gone about the world like wind." The men, or their names, have blown about the earth.

These men also had "little time [...] to pray," the speaker continues. They had to act quickly because it was almost certain they'd be killed before long. For men like John O'Leary, execution was all but inevitable: "the hangman's rope" had already been "spun," the speaker says, and awaited them wherever they went. But that didn't stop the Irish separatists. Even these men, who knew they were in mortal danger and were constantly on the run, were less concerned about getting into heaven than bringing about revolutionary change.

But what did they actually accomplish? What "could they save"? According to the speaker, not much. "God help us," the speaker cries, for emphasis, in a brief aside. Even men like O'Leary, who were firm in their convictions and dedicated to a worthy cause, made little happen—after all, "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone," just like O'Leary himself.

Pessimistically, the speaker suggests that these men weren't even able to save themselves, let alone deliver the people and culture of Ireland. And if those men failed, what hope is there for the ordinary people reading this poem in the newspaper?

LINES 17-24

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this 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.

The speaker introduces another rhetorical question in stanza 3, but the nature of the question has changed. In stanzas 1 and 2, the speaker seemed to address the audience directly. Now, it's almost as if the speaker has forgotten that the audience is there. The second person "you" is nowhere to be found between lines 17 and 24. Instead, the speaker wonders aloud whether "this," the Ireland of the speaker's day, justifies so much past sacrifice and bloodshed.

The speaker then lays out what's basically a who's who of Irish nationalist heroes. The phrase "wild geese" refers to Irish revolutionaries who fled to continental Europe; Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, and Wolfe Tone were major figures in the Irish political imagination of the time.

The anaphora of lines 17-20 lends the list drama and gravitas. Each repetition of the phrase "for this" hammers home the speaker's building despair, as they question whether "this"—modern Ireland—was worth the sacrifices these men made:

> Was it for this the wild geese spread
> [...]
> For this that all that blood was shed,
> For this Edward Fitzgerald died,

In line 22, the speaker suggests that the dreams and ambitions of men like Fitzgerald, Emmet, and Tone might not be entirely rational. These men were possessed of a "delirium"—or wild, even deranged passion—that drove them to extremes.

This harkens back to line 1, where the speaker suggested that their countrymen had "come to sense." The speaker implies that there has been a significant cultural shift toward pragmatism and conciliation, away from "delirium" to "sense." The present age is thus antithetical to Romantic Ireland.

LINES 25-32

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.

In the poem's fourth stanza, the speaker delivers a final, damning illustration of the Irish public. The speaker imagines what might happen if people could "turn the years again" and summon those Irish revolutionaries of the past into the present day.

The speaker calls these men "exiles [...] in all their loneliness and pain," emphasizing how their revolutionary fervor cost them their peace, happiness, and lives. Yet if these men could be brought into the present (that is, 1913), the speaker continues, people would find their passion overly idealistic, even foolish and naive—driven crazy by "[s]ome woman's yellow hair."

Note that the speaker addresses the audience directly once more here: "You'd cry," the speaker says, focusing their frustration squarely back on their target audience. The yellow-haired woman is also an oblique allusion to the mythical figure of Kathleen ni Houlihan (a.k.a. Caitlín Ní Uallacháin, Cathleen Ni Houlian, or the *Sean-Bhean Bhocht*):

- Kathleen ni Houlihan is an emblem of Irish nationalism closely associated with sacrifice and martyrdom. (Yeats had in fact previously published a one-act play called "Cathleen ni Houlihan," in which a destitute old woman entices a strapping young

man to join a doomed uprising against the British—only to then be revealed as a regal, golden-haired maiden.)
- In the poem, the speaker suggests that the audience would utterly fail to grasp what Kathleen ni Houlihan represents to the Irish revolutionaries mentioned in stanza 3. Instead, they'd cry out that these men had been seduced by "Some woman's yellow hair."
- Since the audience cannot appreciate the power of political idealism, they would go so far as to accuse the men of throwing their lives away.

The speaker thus reveals the audience to be a bunch of hypocrites. The men they claim they admire, whose names command the popular imagination? The Irish people would scorn them if they died today. For that reason, the speaker bitterly concludes, it's better to "let them be." After all, they're "dead and gone."

For the first time in the poem, the refrain changes slightly, dropping the mention of "Romantic Ireland." It's as if that dream has faded; the political and cultural ideal bound up in that phrase is already out of reach.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"September 1913" contains many allusions to Ireland's revolutionary martyrs, which drive the poem's social and political critique of modern Ireland. While it can be difficult to appreciate the political implications of this poem today, the historical figures whose names appear throughout the poem would have been immediately recognizable to Yeats's Irish audience at the time. Remember that this was a poem intended to be read by the general public and that it originally appeared in a newspaper. The Irish historical figures whom the speaker name-drops throughout the poem were revered in the popular imagination. The speaker uses these men's names as a shorthand for courage, sacrifice, and true commitment to the struggle for Irish independence.

The speaker specifically names three revolutionaries:

- Edward Fitzgerald, an Irish nobleman who died in prison after an unsuccessful insurrection in 1798.
- Wolfe Tone, who was also killed in 1798 after being captured by the British navy while trying to land French troops in Ireland. Tone had been sentenced to hanging but died of a (likely self-inflicted) throat wound before the sentence could be carried out.
- Robert Emmet, who was executed after leading an uprising in 1803.

The mention of "wild geese" in line 17, meanwhile, alludes to Irish-Catholic soldiers who left Ireland to fight for armies on the European continent, as well as exiled Irish revolutionaries.

By invoking these figures, the speaker calls to mind episodes, from the Irish Rebellion of 1798 through the end of the 19th century, when individuals facing terrible odds nevertheless rose up and attempted to overthrow their English overlords. In doing so, the speaker implicitly and explicitly asks readers to think about how they compare to these brave men. Are they (readers) brave enough to do what's right and support the cause of Irish Nationalism, even if the struggle is inconvenient or politically unpopular?

Not all of the speaker's allusions are so overt, however. In line 28, the speaker mentions a fair-haired woman:

> You'd cry, "Some woman's yellow hair
> has maddened every mother's son":

This is a veiled reference to the mythical figure Kathleen ni Houlihan. Though she often appears in art and literature as an old crone, she sometimes reveals herself as a beautiful young queen with golden hair—Romantic Ireland personified.

In a tricky twist, Yeats's speaker hypothesizes that members of the audience wouldn't recognize the genuine dedication the old Irish heroes had for the dream of Irish liberation, but counts on readers to appreciate the significance of "some woman's yellow hair." Just as Kathleen ni Houlihan takes the measure of unsuspecting Irish men and women, Yeats's speaker tests readers' familiarity with the more mythological dimensions of Irish nationalism.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "O'Leary"
- **Line 16:** "O'Leary"
- **Line 17:** "wild geese"
- **Line 20:** "Edward Fitzgerald"
- **Line 21:** "Robert Emmet," "Wolfe Tone"
- **Line 24:** "O'Leary"
- **Line 28:** "Some woman's yellow hair"
- **Line 32:** "O'Leary"

IRONY

The speaker is full of contempt for "you," the audience, throughout the poem, the language of which is laced with bitter irony. In the opening stanza, for example, the speaker sarcastically accuses readers of having no "need" apart from pilling up coins and prayers. That's because, the speaker sardonically declares, "men were born to pray and save." The speaker doesn't actually believe this. Instead, the speaker is *mocking* their countrymen for acting as though the meaning of life is to accumulate a little money and pile up some goodwill

with God.

Note the pun on "save," too, which might refer to both saving *money* and saving *souls*—things that apparently seem equivalent in the minds of their speaker's contemporaries. Ironically, the speaker says in the following stanzas, the *truly* noble revolutionaries had "little time to pray" and couldn't "save" much of anything at all.

There's even more at play which indicates that the speaker doesn't mean exactly what they say when they insist that

> Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
> It's with O'Leary in the grave.

This refrain, which ends each stanza, seems to suggest that the speaker has truly given up on the dream of "Romantic Ireland." The answer to every rhetorical question they pose throughout the poem is the same: it seems clear that the great revolutionaries like John O'Leary and Wolfe Tone really did sacrifice their lives in vain, and that the speakers' countrymen are simply unable or unwilling to carry on the cause.

But why, then, go through the hassle of writing and publishing the poem at all? Far from actually hoping that readers abandon Irish Nationalism, the speaker perhaps hopes that their lament will inspire their readers to *recommit* to the cause. It's a bit of reverse psychology employed to motivate the poem's audience to take action.

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker anticipates a specific episode of situational irony in order to underscore the hypocrisy of the Irish-Catholic middle class. Yeats's audience lionizes long-dead revolutionary heroes, but if readers ("you") could somehow come face-to-face with "those exiles" today, they'd never understand the men's willingness to sacrifice themselves to free Ireland from British rule. In fact, the same people who valorize the dead revolutionaries would mock them if they were alive today.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 25-32

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Three of the poem's four stanzas include at least one rhetorical question. The poem opens with one such question: the speaker asks what the audience could "need" apart from piling up money and counting prayers, given that, the speaker sarcastically declares, "men were born to pray and save."

The speaker also spends quite a bit of time wondering out loud whether the sacrifices of 1798 and 1803 were at all worthwhile:

> And what, God help us, could they save?
> [...]
> Was it for this the wild geese spread
> The grey wing upon every tide;
> For this that all that blood was shed,
> For this Edward Fitzgerald died

The answer to these questions comes in the form of the poem's refrain: "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave." The spirited history of Irish rebellion has hit a dead end; not only did the champions of "Romantic Ireland" die in vain, the poem suggests, but it's futile to even recall the names of the revolutionary figures of the past.

While the poem's rhetorical argument might seem like a foregone conclusion, the speaker actually asks these questions in order to inspire real-life change. The questions themselves aren't just depressing—they're also *insulting*. Readers can imagine a shopkeeper or clergyman getting redder and redder in the face as Yeats's speaker reiterates the question in stanza 3: "Was it for this [...] for this [...] for this [...]?" Every time the speaker repeats part of the question, they pile on more evidence to suggest that the sacrifices of the old Irish nationalists weren't "for this" at all.

However, because these questions are rhetorical in nature, there's no way for the audience to respond. Instead, if they disagree with the speaker's characterization of the Irish middle class as hypocritical, greedy, and culturally stunted, they'd have to take action to prove it—which is exactly what the speaker wants!

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "What need you, being come to sense,"
- **Line 14:** "And what, God help us, could they save?"
- **Lines 17-22:** "Was it for this the wild geese spread / The grey wing upon every tide; / For this that all that blood was shed, / For this Edward Fitzgerald died, / And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone, / All that delirium of the brave?"

JUXTAPOSITION

The bulk of the poem's critique relies on the juxtaposition of the legacy of Irish revolutionaries and martyrs with "you," the speaker's intended Irish audience. Wolfe Tone, Edward Fitzgerald, and Robert Emmet each had reputations so great that the speaker doesn't even need to say exactly what any of these men did. The speaker makes no mention of any specific rebellion, rising, or battle—the significance of these names simply goes without saying. (That can make this text especially tricky for anyone who hasn't studied up on Irish history!)

Instead, the speaker begins the first stanza with an unflattering portrait of the parochial Irish middle class. "[Y]ou," the addressees, belong to a group recently "come to sense" (i.e.,

come to their senses), a people who have woken up from the dream of revolution and independence. "What need you" is a leading question; it suggests that these people are perfectly satisfied—what else could they need? The speaker immediately undercuts the question with the image of loose change in a "greasy" cash register and a "shivering" penitent. Here, juxtaposition emphasizes the speaker's disapproval and establishes the poem's sarcastic tone.

In stanza 2, the speaker juxtaposes the moral character of men like John O'Leary with that of the average Irish reader in 1913: "they were of a different kind." That is, those men were not simply of another generation but were cut from a different cloth altogether. "You," the audience, recognized that even as a child, when just hearing those men's names said aloud made you pause.

In stanza 3, when the speaker asks, "Was it for this the wild geese spread / The grey wing upon every tide; / For this that all that blood was shed," one can imagine them gesturing broadly at the poverty and political disorder they see around them in Dublin. In this instance, the speaker *implicitly* compares the present state of things with the way things might have been if their countrymen were true to their political convictions.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 9-14
- Lines 17-22

REPETITION

The final two lines of each stanza repeat, creating a refrain:

> Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
> It's with O'Leary in the grave.

The speaker asks several questions, but, thanks to the refrain, the *answer* always stays the same. It's as if the poem, like the frustrated, idealistic speaker, has simply run out of options. Instead of propelling the poem forward, the refrain takes readers back to the same place, a circular motion that mimics the futile cycle of failed Irish rebellions. (Although he didn't know it at the time, Yeats published this poem only three years before the Easter Rising of 1916—which once again saw an armed Irish insurrection crushed and its leaders executed.)

That long history of failure might explain why the speaker's countrymen have given up on the dream of Romantic Ireland, choosing to focus instead on material gain and the possibility of salvation. How do you rally people who seem to have embraced oppression and defeat?

In the first stanza, the speaker also uses repetition to illustrate the humdrum, tedious priorities of the Irish middle class. For the speaker's countrymen, each day revolves around working and going to mass. At work, they "add the halfpence to the pence" and "prayer to shivering prayer" at church. Even though the repetition of "pence" and "prayer," plus the verb "add," make these activities seem cumulative, the speaker insists that they are actually sucking something vital out of everyday life ("the marrow from the bone").

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "halfpence to the pence"
- **Line 4:** "prayer to shivering prayer"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave."
- **Lines 15-16:** "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave."
- **Lines 23-24:** "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave."
- **Lines 31-32:** "But let them be, they're dead and gone, / They're with O'Leary in the grave."

VOCABULARY

Till (Line 2) - A cash register or secure drawer where money is stored in a shop.

Halfpence (Line 3) - A small coin half the value of a British penny, sometimes referred to as a "ha'penny." Here, it's being used disparagingly to downplay the financial interests of the Irish middle class.

Pence (Line 3) - A one penny coin, a small denomination of British currency.

Marrow (Line 5) - Bone marrow, the rich, soft tissue found inside bones. Marrow is often understood as the body's source of strength and vitality; here, it represents something precious and essential.

O'Leary (Line 8, Line 16, Line 24, Line 32) - John O'Leary (1830-1907) was an Irish revolutionary and one of the leaders of a secret, fraternal organization called the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). Yeats knew and admired O'Leary, who had been involved in several failed uprisings over the years. Importantly, like Yeats, O'Leary did not believe that the Catholic Church should be at the center of Irish national identity.

Stilled (Line 10) - Quieted or paused.

Wild geese (Line 17) - A term for Irish-Catholic soldiers who left Ireland to fight for armies on the European continent, as well as exiled Irish revolutionaries.

Edward Fitzgerald (Line 20) - Lord Edward Fitzgerald was an Anglo-Irish nobleman and noted Irish separatist. In the lead-up to the Irish Rebellion of 1798, Fitzgerald was mortally wounded by British authorities and died in prison.

Robert Emmet (Line 21) - Irish republican and leader of the 1803 rebellion in Dublin. Emmet was subsequently captured and executed by the British authorities. His death also inspired an elegy by the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Wolfe Tone (Line 21) - One of the founding members of a revolutionary group called the United Irishmen. Tone was captured by the British navy while trying to land French troops in Ireland during the 1798 rebellion and soon became a martyr for the republican cause. For a more modern interpretation of Tone and his legacy, check out the poem "Wolfe Tone" by Seamus Heaney. A statue of Wolfe Tone also features in chapter 5 of James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Delirium (Line 22) - A disturbed or disordered mental state; a bout of madness or confusion.

Maddened (Line 29) - Driven crazy.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"September 1913" consists of four octaves (eight-line stanzas). The poem's alternating rhyme scheme breaks these octaves into two quatrains.

The poem could also be considered a modified ballade. The traditional ballade is a French lyric form made up of three eight-line stanzas followed by a shorter four-line stanza called an envoi. As in this poem, the last line of each stanza—the refrain—is always the same.

In this case, the refrain actually spans the final two lines of each stanza. And instead of ending with a quartet, Yeats keeps the fourth and final stanza eight lines long. Broadly speaking, the refrain makes the poem feel somewhat circular: the poem ends in much the same place that it began, echoing the futile cycle of failed Irish rebellions.

Yeats does very slightly modifies the opening words of the final refrain, as, with a kind of sigh, the speaker exhorts the reader to leave the spirits of the great Irish revolutionaries at peace. This subtle variation works like an envoi to summarize the speaker's argument and prepare the reader for the end of the poem.

METER

"September 1913" is written in a consistent iambic tetrameter. In this meter, each line contains four iambs (metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable), for a total of eight syllables. This meter is the poem's steady, rhythmic heartbeat, as readers can hear in lines 2-3:

> But fum- | ble in | a grea- | sy till
> And add | the half- | pence to | the pence

Like many writers of metrical verse, Yeats will sometimes introduce some variation into the meter, most commonly by inverting the metrical foot at the start of a line. A little bit of variation keeps the meter interesting; it also allows the writer to play with emphasis or create tension between two or more ideas. The opening line of "September 1913," for example, is a bit complicated metrically, even a little awkward:

> What need you, || being come | to sense,

Meter can be somewhat subjective, and different readers will find different ways to divvy up the line; some might scan those first three beats as "What need you," for example. In any case, the caesura, or pause, after "you" allows for extra stress on this word—and thus on the poem's addressee. It also has the effect of unsettling, even disarming the reader, since it starts them off (literally) on the wrong foot.

Elsewhere, perfectly iambic lines, like the refrain "Ro**man**- | tic Ire | land's **dead** | and **gone**," take on the quality of a truism, or aphorism; it's hard to argue with iambic tetrameter.

RHYME SCHEME

Each of the poem's octaves, or eight-line stanzas, can be divided into two quatrains that each follow the same basic rhyme scheme:

ABABCDCD

The rhyme scheme is not interlocking (the rhymes in the second quatrain don't echo those in the first). In this way, the rhyme scheme creates two distinct halves within each stanza, often comprising two related ideas, questions, or images.

The majority of the rhymes in the poem are full rhymes (also called "perfect" or "exact" rhymes; for example, "sense"/"pence" or "save"/"grave"). A slant rhyme does appear in every stanza, however, always involving the word "gone"—part of the poem's refrain: "bone"/"gone," "spun"/"gone," "Tone"/"gone," and "son"/"gone."

The variation is subtle (the final consonants always match, but the vowel sound is slightly off, as in "bone" and "gone"). One effect of this is to distinguish the sound of the refrain within the second quatrain. Even though the refrain repeats four times, it always sounds slightly different because it doesn't entirely line up with what readers expect to hear.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "September 1913" has a clear political agenda that aligns closely with W.B. Yeats's own brand of Irish nationalism. The speaker voices Yeats's own frustrations with a reading public easily distracted by money and religion and resistant to the revival of the Irish arts (a project Yeats saw as central to the creation of a national identity independent from

Britain). Whether or not one goes so far as to say that the speaker *is* Yeats, the two are closely linked.

The speaker is defined by their political opinions and their antagonistic relationship with the poem's audience. In stanza 1, the speaker displays tremendous scorn for (what they deem) the materialistic, overly pious Irish middle class (of which they don't consider themselves a part). They fixate on the loss of "Romantic Ireland" and are closely aligned with Romantic values like passion, idealism, and a devotion to beauty and art.

In the speaker's mind, Romantic Ireland is exemplified by John O'Leary: a leading Irish separatist who died in 1907, only a few years before this poem was written. Stanza 3 provides more examples of other Irish nationalist heroes the speaker holds in high esteem. The speaker doesn't go so far as to identify with these men, however, referring to them as "they" (while saying "we" when talking about the people of modern Ireland). In stanza 4, a veiled reference to Kathleen ni Houlihan reveals the speaker's familiarity with the rich Irish mythological tradition.

SETTING

The title of the poem tells readers a good deal about its setting: it is September 1913. The poem is addressed to the people of Ireland, and the historical events referenced by the speaker all take place in Ireland as well.

The poem offers little else to help orient readers. Images of commerce in stanza 1 probably locate the poem, or the objects of the speaker's ire, in a city like Dublin or Cork. (Notably absent from the poem are pastoral images of the rural Irish countryside.) The poem leads readers to understand that this a period of political dysfunction and inaction, and a point in time without much genuine revolutionary activity. However, without additional context, the poem doesn't reveal anything specific about the significance of the date, or what exactly inspired the poem's narrator to speak out.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) is widely considered the most influential Irish poet in modern history. He played a vital role in the Irish Literary Revival (also called the Celtic Twilight), which championed a renewed interest in Irish and Gaelic literature, language, history, and culture, all of which had been suppressed by English colonization. This revival was a key part of the Irish push for autonomy, leading to its eventual rebellion and the achievement of an independent Irish state in 1924.

Until he published Poems in 1895, much of Yeats's early literary success actually stemmed from his work as a folklorist. Yeats published five volumes on traditional Irish storytelling between 1888 and 1891, beginning with *Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, which featured stories Yeats had solicited from poor farmers in the countryside.

Yeats's abiding interest in folklore was connected to the Romantic belief that rural cultures had special wisdom that modern societies lacked. Yeats was strongly influenced by English Romantics like Wordsworth and Blake, writers who also emphasized intuitive forms of knowledge, imagination, and the mystical power of the unknown. Like the English Romantics (and, across the pond, the American Transcendentalists), Yeats felt science, rationalism, and materialism often obscured more authentic forms of experience and prevented genuine self-knowledge and self-expression.

Yeats was also convinced that centuries of colonial rule had robbed Ireland of a distinct literary tradition. British suppression of the Irish language, the Great Famine (which killed over a million people), and widespread emigration had left few native Irish speakers to carry on the oral traditions. Moreover, Yeats believed that literature was central to the development of national identity. If Ireland was to become an independent, modern state, it needed its own culture, one that was distinct from the colonial English regime. Yeats wrote, in 1889, "there is no fine nationality without literature, and [...] no fine literature without nationality." This notion was central to Yeats's conception of "Romantic Ireland," and Yeats worked tirelessly to build a robust, "Celtic" literary culture in Ireland, particularly in theater.

"September 1913" was one of several poems that Yeats published in sequence in *The Irish Times*, and then republished privately through his sisters' independent press as a small booklet called *Poems Written in Discouragement, 1912-1913*. Though "September 1913" offers a critique of the entire Irish professional class, Yeats hoped these poems would sway one reader in particular: Arthur Edward Guinness, the 1st Baron Ardilaun. In a letter to the influential Lady Gregory, Yeats wrote, "There is just the unlikely chance the Irish Times comment, if not the poem, may reach Ardilaun. What might seem offensive in a letter or article will not do so in a poem..."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

W.B. Yeats was an Irish nationalist—that is, he believed that Ireland, which at the time was ruled by Great Britain, should be a sovereign nation directly under the control of the Irish people. The majority-Catholic Irish population had struggled to resist English colonial rule ever since Ireland was reconquered in the middle of the 17th century. By 1913, Yeats (who was Anglo-Irish) was particularly concerned that true independence was impossible without a uniquely Irish artistic tradition. Without this, there would be no way for the Irish people to distinguish themselves culturally from Britain. His contributions to the Celtic Revival included the foundation of a national theater (The Abbey) in 1904 and numerous plays.

The poems from Yeats's 1913 booklet, *Poems Written in Discouragement*, including "September 1913," were republished in his 1914 collection, *Responsibilities*. With its new focus on social issues, *Responsibilities* marked a turn in Yeats's writing away from the dreamy and mythological towards simplicity and realism. In *Discouragement* and *Responsibilities*, Yeats was responding to three major public controversies.

- The first was the disgrace of the Irish nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell, whose career and reputation were ruined by a scandal surrounding an extramarital affair. Yeats's poem, "To a Shade," which also appears in *Discouragement and Responsibilities*, defends Parnell's legacy.
- The second was the so-called "*Playboy Riots*." In 1907, Yeats's theater, The Abbey, produced a new play by John Millington Synge called *The Playboy of the Western World*. Nationalist and Catholic audiences were so offended by the play's portrayal of the Irish peasantry that riots broke out in Dublin around the theater. Yeats's poem "On Those That Hated 'The Playboy of the Western World,' 1907," addresses that incident directly.
- But "September 1913" is predominantly a response to the Hugh Lane controversy. Hugh Percy Lane (1875-1915) was a modern art dealer known for collecting works by French Impressionists, including Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. He founded the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin in 1908, but the city government rejected his plans in September 1913. Popular opposition to the Gallery came from upper- and middle-class Dubliners who resented the idea of their taxes going to an art gallery instead of alleviating widespread poverty in the city. It also came from moralists who felt that the modernist paintings in Lane's collection would be inappropriate for the Irish public.

Yeats was sympathetic to the idea that Dublin simply couldn't afford the cost of the Gallery but opposed the handwringing about the works' morality.

Moreover, Yeats was responding to accusations that wealthy Anglo-Irish (that is, Protestant) elites like himself were attempting to take charge of Irish national culture. In "September 1913," Yeats reminds readers that both Catholics (like Wolfe Tone) and Protestants (like Edward Fitzgerald) have fought for "Romantic Ireland." While his critique is aimed at the Catholics who rejected Playboy and the Hugh Lane Gallery, Yeats always emphasizes the shared cultural inheritance of the Irish people.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a short biography of Yeats at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)
- "A Poet Discouraged" — A close look at Yeats's response to the controversy surrounding the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin. (https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/a-poet-discouraged-yeats-1913)
- The Irish Times, September 1913 — An article commemorating the 100-year anniversary of "September 1913" in The Irish Times. (https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/september-1913-1.1519811)
- "Romance In Ireland" — Read the original text of "September 1913" as it first appeared on Monday, September 8, 1913 in The Irish Times. (https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1913/0908/Pg007.html#Ar00709)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- Adam's Curse
- Among School Children
- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- A Prayer for my Daughter
- Byzantium
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Song of Wandering Aengus
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- To a Shade
- When You Are Old

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Favilla, Alyson. "*September 1913*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Jul 2022. Web. 11 Oct 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Favilla, Alyson. "*September 1913*." LitCharts LLC, July 28, 2022. Retrieved October 11, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-butler-yeats/september-1913.