

The death of the ball turret gunner

[Life](#), [Death](#)



A Reflection on "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" Rebeca Espirito Santo
The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner "From my mother's sleep I fell into the
State And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze Six miles from the earth,
loosed from its dream of life I woke to black flack and the nightmare fighters
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

"Randall Jarrell "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner", by Randall Jarrell, is a surprisingly simple and brief poem; nevertheless it is extensive in content. Due to carefully chosen words, with great descriptive power and an appeal to symbolism, Jarrell skillfully accomplishes the task of providing readers with detailed images and feelings of the turret gunner's situation, yet leaves plenty of space for the reader's imagination, interpretation and critique. While reading this poem, one can be encouraged to question the image we have of our soldiers - those who have no fear - while not questioning their bravery. War can produce gruesome situations that can cause even the bravest men to face their fears. The poem's incisiveness is demonstrated by the fact that if the reader doesn't see the title, or if one isn't familiar with what a ball turret is, it becomes very challenging to even know what the poem is about. Once the reader forms a clear image of a B-17 "Flying Fortress" or a B-24 "Liberator", with its small Plexiglas ball turrets located in the bottom fuselage, it becomes extremely easy to visualize the soldier's situation. From the first half of the second line - "And I hunched in its belly" - of the poem it is possible to picture how uncomfortable, lonely and vulnerable the gunner was in the bottom of the airplane.

Then, in the second half of the same line - "till my wet fur froze" - one is able to envision the soldier's distress due to his nervous sweat and the cold,

thin air. The gunner was in an extremely vulnerable position. Even if he was spared another gunner's bullet at the end of the mission, he knew he was still not safe. In the case of a forced landing, he knew he would be sacrificed. On the third line - " Six miles from the earth, loosed from its dream of life" - one can observe his acknowledgment of this surreal reality. This leads the character to the understanding of not only his physical distance from earth, but also from earthly life and the odds against him going back to that life. He was already preparing himself for the worst and suppressing his hopes of survival.

Through the distress of a single man, Jarrell is able to depict the fears of a lonely soldier in an extremely vulnerable position, and invites us into the heinous reality of war which forces us to question our impressions of soldiers having no fear yet not questioning their bravery. War can produce gruesome situations that can cause even the bravest men to face their fears, but it is how they deal with this fear that is the important part. Ball turret gunners were courageous warriors. They were fully aware of how susceptible to death they were, nevertheless, they would continue to fight time after time. WWII was a dreadful episode in human history that killed millions of people, and its bloodshed is described by the UN Charter as a scourge that " has brought untold sorrow to mankind". Jarrell had served in the military himself, thus he knew - at least to some extent - what he was trying to address. The most fascinating aspect of this poem is the paradoxical relationship between its physical briefness and its vast evocative power.

His words are so carefully chosen and descriptive that it grants the reader with greatly detailed images and feelings of the turret gunner's situation and the broader issue that he represents. The use of more words becomes unnecessary; hence, Jarrell masterfully proves that length isn't as important as depth and power. This piece's paradox and theme struck me. As already discussed, Jarrell's capability to evoke so much with so little is quite amazing. It depicts an issue of my personal and academic interest. As a Political Science major with a background in International Relations, war and its causes, consequences and issues intrigues me. The grievance caused by war is something that affects me quite deeply.

This poem shows a very personal, crucial moment in a soldier's life. They truly believe they are going to war to fight for their nation with an ideology that has been forced into their head that they are willing to give up their lives for. At the end of the day, unfortunately, the gravity of these soldier's personal sacrifices are often lost - converted to a statistic - among the many thousands of sacrifices that occur during war. This poem seemingly parallels this situation in that it is a small and relatively simple poem - lost in a sea of countless other poems - yet upon further investigation reveals something much more meaningful.