

How does yeats
present death in the
man and the echo
essay sample



**ASSIGN
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The "Man and the Echo", written in 1938 just months before Yeats's death, is a poem heavily associated with regret, philosophy, and death. The dominating theme of the poem seems to be death, and Yeats uses a variety of techniques to portray his thoughts and feelings about it. The poem begins with the image that Yeats is trapped in an isolated cave, and the effect this creates is that it reflects "Man's" effort to control the consequences of his voice.

The fact that Yeats goes to a bottom of a put to get away from the world could suggest that he is ridden with guilt and regret, and is preparing himself for death. Evidence for this guilt is that he rhetorically asks whether "that play of mine send out men the English shot" or "Did words of mine put too great strain on that woman's reeling brain"(referring to Margo Collins). Man questions the effect of his written work on readers and is plagued with guilt for events his work potentially caused.

He worries that his words caused negative action, such as inspiring men to go to war, and failed to cause positive action, such as stopping a house from being "wrecked." His unanswered questions, however, reflect the impossibility of knowing the actual effect of his words. He is haunted by a sense of unknowing about questions of life, philosophy and his own past - as he can "never get the answers right." The fact that Yeats lies awake "night after night" shows the guilt he is facing and maybe even insomnia to the point where "and all seems evil until I sleepless would lie down and die".

This statement is very ambiguous- is Yeats trying to say that he feels death would be the only thing that would release him from the suffering of regret

and guilt-escapism, or does he mean that death would put an end to the evil that is supposedly being caused by his writing. The Echo then repeats what he says, but only repeats the phrase " lie down and die". Echo takes Yeats words out of context completely however, and this highlights a very key point.

The fact that the Echo echoes Yeats phrase out of context could create the effect that is difficult for Yeats to control how his own voice is interpreted and used- as even repeating Yeats's words(as the echo shows) changes their meaning. This reflects the problem Yeats is experiencing- the echo leaving out two key words- " sleepless would" shows the ability of other people to change one's words and emphasizes the lack of control Man has in how others interpret his voice.

If man cannot control his own echo, then he has no hope in controlling the reader's interpretations- hence his feelings of powerlessness and guilt. The second stanza sees a change in tone and theme from Yeats. Instead of continuing the regretful, guilt-ridden, helpless mood, he becomes rather philosophical, after being interrupted by the Echo telling him to " lie down and die". It is as if Yeats, after hearing the echo, feels the need to justify his actions and explain himself. He goes on to explain why he should clean his slate.

Yeats describes how " there can be no work so great which cleans man's dirty slate"- telling us that Yeats believed that whatever somebody does in life, however good it is, it can never " pay back" and " make up for" the things man has done in the past. This further highlights Yeat's attitude to

wrongdoing. Yeats states that he disapproves of the use of alcohol, drugs and love to lessen the pains of life, and says that no matter what disadvantages you have with your body, you should be thankful that you have still have it.

He states that giving into disease or committing suicide is pure cowardice, and one should instead bare the hardship and toils of life. This contrasts greatly to one of his previous poem, " An Irish Airman", where he seems to believe that death is a way out of the meaningless and " wasted breath" of life. Another comparison you could make is on the topic of life after death. In " Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats suggests that there is a certain continuation (" standing in God's holy fire", " Or set upon a golden bough to sing"), however in this poem he is suggestive of nothingness after death.

This could reflect his feelings at the time- that he feels utterly hopeless and cannot see any light at the end of tunnel, possibly due to the guilt/regret. Compared to the first stanza, the language of the second stanza seems more complex and deep. In the first stanza, relatively simple language is used, with many monosyllables. However in the second stanza more intricate language is used. This could reflect Yeats's enhanced thoughtfulness in the second stanza, when he moves on from regret and despair and begins to look at the wider picture.

The Echo once again interrupts the Man in the same way, echoing only a part of his sentence. It is important to point out that the simple lines of the Echo are the most memorable of the entire poem because of their placement, and the fact they are so short they draw attention. They interrupt the rhythm and

rhyme of the Man's thoughts. For example, the first stanza follows a regular AABB rhyme scheme and the regular rhythm and rhyme of the first stanza lends to a song-like feel that is abruptly interrupted by Echo's line.

This interruption highlights the lack of control Man has over how his voice is used and interpreted. In the third stanza Yeats focuses on the joys of dying by saying " Shall we in that great night rejoice? ". However it is ambiguous. Does he mean that death should be celebrated due to there being a God and afterlife, or is he instead saying that death should be celebrated due to the release from pain and suffering it provides. He confirms that he has " lost the theme", due to the echo interrupting him, tempting him into death.

He finishes the poem with the image of a " stricken rabbit", which interrupts his trail of philosophical thought, and he uses the image of the rabbit to show its vulnerability, and to show that he may one day end up as helpless as the rabbit. There is no echo at the end of the third stanza, which could symbolise the fading/dying of Yeats, or that Yeats is at peace with himself. To conclude, we can see in this poem Yeats's thoughts at this time- he feels full of guilt and regret, but his views on the essence of life are portrayed in a very philosophical manner.

The role of the echo is very important, we see how it interrupts the carefully structured rhyme scheme and repeats Yeats' words but out of context- Echo interrupts him twice, both times encouraging him to give in to death immediately, but Yeats resists, and we learn that the Echo is merely a reverberation of Yeats's own voice and that perhaps Yeats's selective hearing of echo's(his own) words represent a desire to give in to death

without dealing with all the past his regret and guilt-ridden mind thinks is necessary.