

Easter 1916 : A Critical Analysis

- W.B. Yeats

The poem 'Easter 1916' is a poetic pronouncement of the heartrending emotions of W.B. Yeats consequent upon the tragic events after the Easter Rising of 1916 against the British rule of Ireland. The uprising was unsuccessful, and most of the Irish republican leaders involved in it were executed for treason. The poem was written in 1916, but first published in 1921 in the collection 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer'.

W.B. Yeats was a committed nationalist. But, he rejected violence as a means to secure Irish independence. This led him to have a strained relation with some of the revolutionary figures who eventually led the uprising. But, the capital punishment of these figures at the hands of the British was a dreadful shock to Yeats as they were to the ordinary Irish people of the time.

In the poem 'Easter 1916', Yeats was working through his feelings about the revolutionary movement. The persistent refrain that 'a terrible beauty is born' turned out to be predictive. The execution of the leaders of the Easter Rising by the British had the opposite effect to what the British had intended. The brutal killings led to a reinvigoration of the Irish Republican movement rather than its dissipation.

The poem sets out by showing the initial ideological distance between Yeats and some of the revolutionary figures. Prior to the rising, the poet would only exchange 'polite meaningless words' with the revolutionaries. He would even indulge in 'a mocking tale or gibe' about their political ambitions. However, this attitude changes with time, as he can now see how:

All changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.

In the second stanza, the poet proceeds to describe in greater detail the key figures involved in the Easter uprising. But, he only alludes to them without actually listing their names. This stanza also shows how Yeats was able to separate his private feelings towards some of the revolutionary figures from the greater nationalist cause that the group was pursuing. While Yeats had a positive regard for some of these republican leaders, he despised Major John MacBride, who as the estranged husband of Maud Gonne had abused both Gonne and their daughter during their married life. Although Yeats considered MacBride to be a 'vainglorious lout' who had 'done most bitter wrong' to Maud Gonne, who was once close to Yeats' heart, he includes him in his eulogy among those who have fallen for their republican ideals.

The third stanza of the poem differs from the first two stanzas by abandoning the first-person narrative of 'I' and moving to the natural realm of streams, clouds, and birds. The poet elaborates on the theme of change and introduces the symbol of the 'stone', which opens and closes the stanza. The images of clouds moving, seasons changing, horse-hoof sliding are all characterized by their transience. Amid them, the stone is a symbol of permanence and enduring strength. Yeats compares the fixedness of the revolutionaries' purpose to that of the stone. He feels that their hearts are 'enchanted to a stone'. The stone disturbs or 'troubles' 'the living stream', a metaphor for how the steadfastness of their purpose contrasts sharply with the shifting moods of the common people. The singularity of their purpose, leading to their ultimate death, cut through the complacency and indifference of everyday Irish society of the time.

The fourth and last stanza of the poem resumes the first person narrative of the first and second stanzas. The stanza returns to the image of the stony heart: 'Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart', Yeats wrote, putting the determined struggle of Irish republicans in the Easter Rising in the context of the long, turbulent history of British colonialism in Ireland, as well as alluding to the immense psychological costs of the long struggle for independence. Indeed, the poet cries, 'O when may it suffice?', and answering his own question with the line, 'That is heaven's part' (making an allusion to Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet' – the parallel line occurs in Act I, scene V, regarding Gertrude's guilt: 'Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven'). In Yeats' schema, Heaven's role is to determine when the suffering will end and when the sacrifices are considered sufficient; whilst the role of the people left behind is to forever remember the names of those who had fallen in order to properly lay their wandering spirits to rest: '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.'

In the second half of the last stanza, the poet wonders whether the sacrifices were indeed warranted: 'Was it needless death after all?', contemplating the possibility that the British might still allow the 'Home Rule Act 1914' to come into force without the uprising. However, Yeats made the point that what's done was done. All that is important is to remember the revolutionaries' dream and carry on: 'We know their dream; enough/ To know they dreamed and are dead.' There is no point arguing over whether these revolutionaries should or should not have acted so rashly for their cause as they did: 'And what if excess of love/ bewildered them till they died?' These are some of the most poignant lines in the poem, with the phrase 'excess of love' recalling the character of Oisín in Yeats' long poem 'The Wanderings of Oisín'.

In the end, the Yeats resigns to commemorating the names of those fallen revolutionary figures, viz. Thomas MacDonagh, John MacBride, James Connolly and Patrick Pearse, as eternal heroes of the Irish Republican movement (symbolised by the colour green), with Yeats adapting the final refrain to reflect the price these people paid to change the course of Irish history:

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.

The extent to which Yeats was willing to eulogize the members of the Easter Rising can be seen in his usage of 'green' to commemorate these heroes, even though he generally abhors the use of the colour green as a political symbol (Yeats's abhorrence was such that he forbade green as the color of the binding of his books). In commemorating the names of the revolutionaries in eloquent lamentation in the final stanza, including even his love rival Major John MacBride, Yeats reconciled his personal private sentiments towards some of the individuals involved with the larger nationalist sentiments upheld and championed by the poem, even if there were revolutionaries whose strategies he did not fully agree with. Yeats has an interesting perspective on the historical significance of his poem, adding to the tension of his recording. The revolutionaries 'now and in time to be...are changed, changed utterly' – the knowledge of which shows Yeats' astute insight into the historical importance of his poetic memorial of these revolutionary figures.