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## **Moral and Aesthetic in Yeast's "Easter 1916"**

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## Abstract

William Butler Yeats( 1865-1939) is the most famous twentieth century-English poet. He is celebrated in both Irish and English literature. One of his most famous poems is “Easter 1916”. This poem shows his national attitudes towards the Irish issue of independence from Britain. However, the present paper *Moral and Aesthetic in Yeats'' Easter 1916''* aims to analyze the aesthetic and moral aspects in “Easter 1916” which shows the poet’s attitude towards 1916 uprising.

This paper is divided into two sections and conclusion. Section one deals with Yeats’ life, his poetry and some of his works. While section two talks about a summary of the poem and the moral and aesthetic aspects in the poem. The study ends up with the conclusion that sums up the finding of the research.



# Section one

## 1.1. Yeats: Biographical Note

W. B. Yeats was born in Dublin, Ireland in June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1865. W.B Yeats was the eldest child. John Butler Yeats, William's father, was a painter and a lawyer and his mother is Susan Mary Pollexfen. He spent his early life in London because at that time his father was studying art in London. Yeats's family lived in London for about 14 years. In 1880, Yeats' family returned to Ireland and he studied high school there. When the family moved back to Ireland, Yeats studied at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin where he met many famous artists of the time (1).

Yeats' family belonged to Anglo-Irish minority who were mostly Protestant. However, Yeats adopted and supported Irish nationalism and the need to have an independent Irish state. His views and poems took shape after meeting Maud Gonne. Since, he belonged to the protestant minority, there was an expectation that he would associate himself with them. But instead he chose to be part of the dominate Irish majority (2).

Yeats fell in love with Maud Gonne. He proposed to her many times, but she refused him every time he asked for her hand. It might be his love to Gonne that Yeats became an Irish patriot and nationalist. Instead Maud Gonne married the Irish soldier John MacBride who was later executed for taking part in the uprising of 1916. Yeats later met another woman who became his wife. This woman is

called George Hyde-Lees. He had a daughter called Anne and a son called William Michael from her (3).

## **1.2. Yeats' Poetics and some of his works**

Yeats' style is simple to extricate from romantic ambiguity. It brings the rhythm from everyday speech. His thoughts mix between the spiritualism of William Blake and the idealism of Percy Bysshe Shelly and the aesthetic thoughts of pre-Raphaelite poets. Yeats stimulates modernism in poetry which is found in the poetry of T.S. Elliot, Edith Sitwell and Ezra Pound. He extends the poetic subject and he sought a new language and rhythm (4). At the beginning, he wrote poems about imagination and Celtic mythology. Because of the bloody uprising, Yeats started writing poetry about contemporary topics and that's when he wrote Easter 1916. Although the bloody uprising failed, it marked the beginning of a new Ireland. The sacrifice of the leaders gave us a deep impression about the Irish people. In his poetry, he talks about the conflict between reality and the ideal. But now he puts romantic ideals behind him and faced the reality of the world (5).

Yeats started writing when he was young. His first literary work was published when he was just 20 years old. In 1892, Yeats wrote one of his best works which is The Countess Kathleen. Then in 1902, he wrote Cathleen ni Houlihan which is believed to be about Maud Gonne as she was the person who

introduced him to Irish Nationalism. Yeats wrote his collection "The Wind among the Reeds" in the 1899. Some of his other works include "The Lake Isle of Innisfree (1890) the Seven Woods (1903), The Green Helmet and Other Poems (1910), A Coat (1912), Responsibilities (1914), Easter, 1916, The Wild Swans at Coole (1917), Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921), The Tower (1928), The Tower, The Winding Stair (1929), and Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems (1932)(6).

## Notes

- 1 <https://www.biography.com/people/william-butler-yeats-9538857> Retrieved on Feb 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 2 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats> Retrieved on Feb 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 3 <https://www.biography.com/people/maud-gonne-215202> Retrieved on Feb 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 4 Holt, Rinehart and Winston, () Adventures in English Literature, Athena Editions
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# Section Two

## **2.1. Summary about “Easter 1916”**

“Easter 1916” or the bloody uprising was written between May and September 1916. It was kept unpublished until 1921. “Easter 1916” is one of the grandest, most important and powerful poem of the Twentieth century (1). “Easter 1916” refers to the Irish rebellion on Easter Monday April 24th, 1916 when a group of rebels started this uprising against the British rule to achieve Irish independence. “Easter 1916” shows the impact of the bloody uprising on the Irish people and also shows the terror that was caused by this uprising. Yeats wrote this poem to pay tribute to the sacrifice of the Irish people and to commemorate the bloody uprising (2).

There are many major themes in “Easter 1916”. One of these themes is the political theme. “Easter 1916” is based on historical happenings. When a group of people led by Patrick Pears made their uprising. The rebels made this uprising against the British rule to achieve the Irish independence and to make Ireland united. despite of the rebels themselves knew that this uprising will fail but they made this uprising. The execution of the men made them martyrs and they achieved the Irish Independence by fighting against the British rule (3). The theme of sacrifice is apparent in this poem when Yeats describes some of the people who fought against the British rule. Those people are John MacBride, Patrick Pears and

Thomas MacDonagh. This poem is to pay tribute to their sacrifice (4). The theme of immortality is clear in “Easter 1916”. Yeats questions the great loss of the men in this uprising. Yeats asks, “O when may it suffice?” He asks why the rebels sacrificed themselves for events they knew it will lose. Yeats mentioned John MacBride, Patrick Pears and Thomas MacDonagh and the other who fought, and they lost their lives for the Irish Independence. Yeats immortalizes their sacrifices by writing this poem and mentioning their names to be remembered in the history of Ireland (5).

## **2.2: The Moral aspects of “Easter 1916”**

Moral refers to what is right or what is ethical. Moral also makes human distinguish good and bad or right and wrong (6). In “Easter 1916”, the moral aspect is very prevalent. Yeats mentions the moral aspect in many different lines. One way is to use the poem to pay tribute to the fallen heroes. Another way is to make the poem as an endorsement letter to the uprising as it will ultimately lead to the Irish Independence.

Yeats begins his poem with the verse “I have met them at close of day”. Then, Yeats repeats the verse “Polite meaningless words”. Yeats confess that he knows the people who led the uprising and his reaction to them was just to say meaningless words just like meeting anybody. Therefore, Yeats seems to be morally obliged to apologize them for ignoring them (7).

Yeats mentions the story of MacBride. Although he didn't mention his name but from the description one can guess his name. He described him with the worst of traits. Then he mentions that even this villain has changed by the beauty of freedom. Yeats wants to say that freedom makes the worst of people moral. In the verse "Wherever green is worn". Yeats chooses the green color because it is the national color of the Irish people. The green color also has historical importance. It was first used in 1641 during the Great Irish rebellion. This rebellion was led by Catholic bishops and Irish landowners who the British authorities displaced to settle protestants in their areas in Northern Ireland. From that time on, the green color was used to refer to the Irish people. Apparently, Yeats uses the green color for moral reasons. He wants to refer to the sacrifices of all Irish people from the first Irish rebellion to the Easter uprising. In using the green color, Yeats did not only pay tribute to the Easter uprising fighters, but also to all fighters who fought for Ireland before. Therefore, it is Yeats moral duty to include all Irish heroes represented by the national Irish color (8).

"I write it out in a verse—, MacDonagh and MacBride, And Connolly and Pearse"  
These lines represent the moral side. Yeats, by mentioning their names in this poem, he wants to immortalize them and makes the Irish people remember them. He also wants them to make them heroes because they were the leaders of this uprising. Through this uprising Ireland has become united and get their

independence. In addition to that, Yeats also wants to fulfil his moral duty to pay tribute to those heroes.

At the same time, Yeats seems to talk about the moral aspect from a different angle. He criticized the uprising especially in the verses “Too long a sacrifice, Can make a stone of the heart.” and “Was it needless death after all?” Yeats wants to criticize the use of violence to achieve political goals. He warns the rebels that the long-term effect of using violence is to make people stone-hearted. He also warns that the continuous struggle can lead to the loss of many lives that doesn't need to be wasted. Therefore, the moral lesson that Yeats wants to deliver is that even with the all positive aspects of the uprising, the leaders had to be careful to its results especially that England promised to give Ireland independence after the war. However, Yeats wants to morally criticize the abruptness of the decision to go to war and use the poem to criticize the uprising to achieve the best to the Irish people.

### **2.3:Aesthetic aspects of “Easter 1916”**

Aesthetic refers to the science that studies the meaning of beauty. Aesthetic has two approaches which are the psychological and the philosophical. The psychological stresses on the artist's creation and the appreciation from the master. The philosophical approach emphasizes on the importance of nature and beauty and their relationship with good and truth (9). In Easter 1916, Yeats deals with the

aesthetic aspect in two different ways which are using natural imagery and the using language to deliver some anecdotes. Yeats uses many natural imageries in the third stanza. These imageries are “the flying bird, the person who rides the horse, and the floating clouds”. Yeats mentions these beautiful imageries in his poem to show us the nice and beautiful nature in Ireland. This can be said to be the best of example of the aesthetic aspect in Easter 1916. Yeats also talks about the aesthetic aspect when he repeats the verse “A terrible beauty is born.” This line represents the aesthetic side in this poem. Yeats wants to say despite the killing, executions, suffering and pain that was cause by the bloody uprising, there is something sweet. This sweet thing is the Irish freedom.

Yeats also talks about the aesthetic aspect through using language to tell some anecdotes. Yeats talks about the change that impacted him and Ireland after the uprising in a very aesthetic way. He seems very smooth in his description by stating his relationship with the leaders of the rebellion and ending it with the beauty that was born through the revolution. Yeats achieves that purpose through the use of use of literary devices like resonance when shifting between life and death and rhyme using words like day and grey. These devices add an aesthetic touch to the poem that can be felt by reader even decades after it was published (10).

Yeats describes the quiet scene of Dublin before the bloody uprising of 1916 had happened. He describes the people who came to their work at the evening. He shows how he overtakes those people either with nod of head or polite meaningless words (11). Yeats repeats the phrase “meaningless words” to say that his talk with these people is unimportant and to make us perceive that his connection with those people is sketchy and boring (12). This can be found in these lines:

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 (Wollman, 1972)

Yeats describes one of the properties of his style. His expression is very simple and beautiful. But the simple and beautiful description contradicts with the terror or the fear that was caused by the bloody uprising. Because of the bloody uprising had happened, everything has changed suddenly “All changed, changed utterly:” (13). Yeats ends the first stanza with the phrase “A terrible beauty is born.” is a strong oxymoron which is used to show the impact of Easter uprising (14). It is terrible because the great number of people who were executed. It is beautiful because the rebels achieved their goal and they get their independence:

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 (Wollman, 1972).

Yeats mentioned an unidentified woman in his poem as a leading figure in the uprising. This woman is Countess Constance Markiewicz. The mentioning of that woman and her support for this uprising was not positive but rather a form of criticism as she said, “In ignorant good-will,” He criticized her involvement in politics as taking her femininity away. This is expressed in this line “Until her voice grew shrill.” This is just to say that she lost her feminine voice by involving herself in politics. He seems to compare her life before and after the bloody uprising. Before the uprising, she was a beautiful young lady. But once she got older and got involved in politics, she lost that beauty. This is sure the common attitude of people towards women’s involvement in politics. It is tied up to their silence and isolation from the public (15):

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? (Wollman, 1972)

Yeats begins talking about a man who kept a school. This man is Patrick Pears who is one of the leaders of the uprising. He was executed by the British authorities (16). The poet also mentions Pears’ friend Thomas MacDonagh who a

theatrical and a poet (17). Yeats liked his character because he was a good writer but at the end he was executed by the British authorities. He was famous because he has sensitive nature and sweet feeling:

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 (Wollman, 1972).

Yeats begins to talk about another man from the bloody uprising. This man is John MacBride (18). John MacBride was married to Maud Gonne who was Yeats' beloved (19). Yeats describes John MacBride as unstable man and lout. Yeats doesn't like this character because he caused pain for people in Easter 1916 (20). Yeats ends the second stanza of this poem by repeating the phrase "A terrible beauty is born." Perhaps, Yeats wants to say that in spite of the bloody uprising, there is something beautiful that the Irish people achieved their goal and they got the Irish Independence from the British rule.

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 (Wollman, 1972).

In the third stanza, Yeats refers to the Irish people. He compares their heart with a stone. He doesn't mean that their hearts are passionless and cold, but he means that

their hearts are unbreakable, unchangeable and undefeatable like stones. He mentions that the seasons like summer and winter are changing but the rebels' emotions don't change even after death. Yeats mentions a natural scene when he shows us the things that change over the time like birds, the person who ride rides the horse and the cloud. These things change minutes by minute, but the rebellious passion doesn't change even after death (21):

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 (Wollman, 1972)

Yeats shows us many natural imageries like the clouds and the horse slide on the brim. All these things change minute by minute, but this political cause is still alive like a stone even after death. He also uses natural imageries when he says “moor-hens” and “moor cock”. Those imageries refer to the fighters' death.

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 (Wollman, 1972).

Yeats makes the third stanza more powerful when he brings the immovable stone in the minds of all. The stones in the mind of all takes place “A terrible beauty is born.” At the end of the first two stanzas and the last stanza this makes this stanza stronger. This means that the stones symbolize terrible beauty. Those people are

died but by making this uprising or the political cause made them great people because they changed the history of Ireland and freed the Irish people and they got their independence from the British rule (22). Yeats started talking about the stones who describes it as unchanging stone like the people who fought in the bloody uprising “Easter 1916”. This makes people wonder when the sacrifice of the people will be enough and how many people must die before this pain ends. The answer when there will be enough bloodletting to end militancy and murder.

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, (Wollman, 1972)

“To murmur name upon name,” This means the names of the dead. Yeats begins to talk about people who spend their lives mourning their loved ones like mothers who mourn their children. He uses metaphor when he talks about nightfall. Nightfall doesn't actually mean night but rather death.

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; (Wollman, 1972)

Yeats begins wondering if the death that resulted from Easter uprising is “needless death after all.” Then he talks about England. He says, “For England may keep faith.” He says that after all the violence, pain, and suffering England still promises Ireland that it will give them their independence. The Irish people dreamed of the Irish independence, but now they are all dead.

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; (Wollman, 1972)

Then Yeats mentions the men who led the Easter uprising. Those men are “MacDonagh and MacBride, And Connolly and Pearse.” They were the leading figures of this uprising. Yeats uses metonymy when he uses the green color as the national color of Irish people. Metonymy is a type of metaphor where a name is used to describe something using that name (23). Yeats wants to show us the sacrifice of the people who were executed in this uprising is remembered when the people wear this color. The green color the Irish freedom and the history of Ireland.

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. (Wollman, 1972)

## Notes

- 1 <http://www.yeatsday.com/event-detail/?event=103> Retrieved on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018
- 2 <https://www.britannica.com/event/Easter-Rising> Retrieved on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018
- 3 <https://www.enotes.com/topics/easter-1916/themes> Retrieved on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 4 <https://www.studienet.dk/engelsk/analyse/easter-1916-by-william-butler-yeats/themes-and-message> Retrieved on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 5 <https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Easter-1916/themes/> Retrieved on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 6 <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/moral> Retrieved on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 7 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/100-years-later-yeatss-easter-1916-still-stirs-debate-about-its-meaning/article29720818/> March 13th, 2018
- 8 <http://time.com/4699771/green-irish-st-patricks-day-color/> March 14th, 2018
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- 11 Ezawa, Kyoko () Re-reading "Easter 1916" by W.B Yeats Retrieved on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 12 <https://www.shmoop.com/easter-1916/words-symbol.html> Retrieved on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- 13 Ezawa, Kyoko () Re-reading "Easter 1916" by W.B Yeats
- 14 <https://www.shmoop.com/easter-1916/lines-13-23-summary.html> Retrieved on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018
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- 16 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Butler-Yeats> Retrieved on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018
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20 Wollman, Maurice (1972) Ten Twentieth- century Poet, Harrap London, London

21 <https://www.shmoop.com/easter-1916/lines-41-52-summary.html> Retrieved on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018

22 <https://www.shmoop.com/easter-1916/lines-70-80-summary.html> Retrieved on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018

23 <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/metonymy?s=t>

## **Conclusion**

Aesthetically, Yeats is with the rebellion. He glorifies the rebels' names and their sacrifices. Moreover, he refers to the uprising by using the beautiful phrases such as "a terrible beauty is born". However, morally, Yeats is against the rebellion because of the pain, suffering and killing that was caused by this uprising. He refers to his moral attitude by using some phrases like "Polite meaningless words".

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