

Easter 1916 by William Butler Yeats

I

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,
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.

II

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?
This man had kept a school
And rode our winged 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.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vain-glorious 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.

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 change.
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim;
And a horse plashes within it
Where long-legged moor-hens dive
And hens to moor-cocks call.
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland. He was considered Anglo-Irish, descending from English Protestant settlers. Considered one of the twentieth century's great poets and visionaries, Yeats won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

Yeats knew many of the rebels involved in the Easter Rising. He himself was in England at the time of the Rising. Whether he feels guilty for not being in Ireland at the time is open for debate, and is one of the mysteries of this poem. Despite being a reflection and commentary on a significant event in Irish history, Yeats' poem was not published until 1920.

"*Easter 1916*" is a reflection on the events surrounding the Easter Rising, an armed insurrection which began in Dublin, Ireland on Easter Monday, April 24, 1916. A small number of labor leaders and political revolutionaries occupied government buildings and factories, proclaiming a new independent Irish Republic. At this time in history, Ireland was under British rule. After the Rising, the leaders were executed by firing squad. William Butler Yeats wrote about their deaths in the poem "Sixteen Dead Men."

Easter 1916 Summary

The poem opens with Yeats remembering the rebels as he passed them on the street. Before the Rising, they were just ordinary people who worked in shops and offices. He remembers his childhood friend Constance Markievicz, who is "that woman"; the Irish language teacher Padraic Pearse, who "kept a school" called St. Enda's; the poet Thomas MacDonagh "helper and friend" to Pearse; and even Yeats's own rival in love John MacBride, "a drunken, vainglorious lout." After reflecting on the rebels' constancy of purpose, as if their hearts were "enchanted to a stone," the poet wonders whether the rebellion was worth it. The poem ends on a note of ambivalence and futility, reflecting Yeats's own reluctance to engage in political debate. The poem is divided into four stanzas, symbolizing the month of April, the fourth month. It is known for its famous refrain, "All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born."

The first stanza describes Dublin, where the revolutionaries lived and worked. Dublin is known for its "eighteenth-century houses," rows of connected and identical four story brick homes, each doorway made distinctive by "fan light" windows. Yeats himself lived in one such house, at 82 Merrion Square. In this stanza not much happens other than remembering

how he and the rebels exchanged pleasantries on the street or talked at the “club.” The club was a traditional gentleman’s social meeting place open to members only. It was part of a fashionable English upper-class tradition and the revolutionaries were not members. Yeats admits that he belittled the earnest rebels to his companions at the club.

One should also take note of the language Yeats chose to use in these lines. His writing is commonly associated with flowery language, and very traditionally poetic sounding verses. This is not the case here. The lines are simplified, just as his speech is to these revolutionaries. There are certain phrases, such as ” mocking tale or a gibe” which also speak to the poet’s tone towards the subjects. These words in particular are intentionally strange and are meant to make a reader questions why they are being used. It is clear Yeats, or at least his speaker, has a difficult and complicated relationship with the Rising and those who participated.

Toward the end of the stanza, Yeats introduces the subtle, but powerful, metaphor of “motley.” To wear motley is to wear different colors combined. The people of Dublin could be said to be a “motley” group in 1916: they were Catholic and Protestant, Irish in spirit but English in terms of citizenship, poor and rich. Here Yeats is making use of metonymy, or the creation of a relationship between an object and something closely related to it. In this case Yeats beliefs about the clothes and their silly, multicoloured designs, are transferred to the lives of those wearing them.

The River Liffey divides Dublin; many of the rebels worked on the poorer north side of the city. Court jesters also traditionally wore motley, and Yeats is likely also referring to the tradition of the “stage Irishman,” a comic figure in English plays, usually portrayed as being drunk. The poet thought the rebels were like these ridiculous jesters and once mocked their dreams. This one word encapsulates the social, political, and cultural situation of Dublin in 1916.

The stanza ends with the refrain that will mark all the stanzas of the poem, the oxymoron: “a terrible beauty is born.” Terrible and beauty are opposite sentiments and speak to the concept of the “sublime” in which horror and beauty can exist simultaneously. It is usually experienced from afar. This could be said for Yeats’ perspective on the Rising. The Easter

Rising was terrible because of its violence and loss of life, but the beauty was in the dream of independence, a “wingèd horse” of romantic imagination.

In the second stanza, Yeats begins to name the rebels by their social roles. Their names will be listed directly in the fourth and final stanza of the poem. The people Yeats mentions in the text are actual historical figures. He remembers that Constance Markievicz, one of the leaders of the Easter Uprising. She is known to have designed the Citizen Army uniform. He states that she was sweeter before arguing for Irish independence. This is seen through a second instance of metonymy in which her “shrill” voice is compared to her femininity. She used to ride horses and hunt rabbits, but then she got involved via her husband, in the Rising.

Yeats also speaks on Padraic Pearse, a poet and another leader of the Uprising. He mentions this man as riding “our winged horse.” This is a reference to the Pegasus, which represented poets in Greek mythology. The “other” who Yeats mentions next is Thomas MacDonagh. He was also a poet but was executed before he could write anything lasting. Yeats hoped this young man would become a great name in literature.

Next Yeats moves on to John MacBride. He is described as a “drunken vainglorious lout,” or hick. MacBride was married to Maud Gonne, a woman Yeats was deeply in love with throughout his life. John MacBride was accused of physically abusing her. Although Yeats clearly hates this person, he states that he must add him into the narrative as he too died fighting.

The “causal comedy” may refer to the idea of Dublin being a stage, as in the famous line from *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare, “all the world’s a stage; and all the men and women merely players.” In the 19th century, domestic comedies were plays about ordinary middle-class life and family concerns. Yeats and MacBride had been fighting for the love of the beautiful actress and revolutionary Maud Gonne, whom Yeats adored, but who MacBride married.

The third stanza of the poem introduces an extended pastoral metaphor. The rebels have hardened their hearts against the English, and have focused on “one purpose”—armed rebellion. The hearts of these rebels are compared to a stone that “troubles” a stream of history. Not only are the hearts representative of the entire person, they are referred to as

stones. They are immovable, dedicated to one purpose. It is at this point that Yeats is changes his tone towards the rebels. They are garnering a respect they didn't have before.

In order to emphasize the unchanging nature of the rebels Yeats goes through a variety of images. He speaks on the rating briefs and the tumbling clouds. These are things which do change. They contrast the rebels' hearts.

In the final stanza of the poem, Yeats asks the significant question about the Rising and the subsequent executions: "Was it needless death after all?" Was it all worth it? Did the rebels feel so much love for their country that they were willing to sacrifice their lives? And what good is Ireland if the dreamers are dead? The immediate political issue that arises is that England was on the verge of granting Ireland status as an independent—or "free"—state, which would allow it to have its own parliament. The granting of independence had been set aside during World War I because the English required Irish support of the war.

In the second stanza, Yeats introduced the idea "the song." In stanza four he developed the idea more fully. In Irish political ballad tradition, naming the names of martyrs was important. Yeats follows the tradition by listing Padraic Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and John MacBride. He also includes James Connolly at this point, the labor leader.

Green is the traditional color associated with Ireland, the Emerald Isle. It is also the color of the original Irish flag. At the end of the poem, Yeats reconciles himself to the fact that "wherever green is worn," people will remember the sacrifices of the rebels of 1916.

Easter 1916 Form

The stanzas of *Easter 1916* intentionally have an irregular line length and meter. Stanzas 1 and 3 are divided into 16 lines, representing both the year 1916 and the 16 men who were executed after the Easter Rising. These stanzas also are scenic in character, invoking the landscape of Dublin city and the surrounding Irish countryside. Stanzas 2 and 4 are about specific people involved in the Rising. There are 24 lines in Stanzas 2 and 4, symbolizing the fateful day of the month on which the Rising began : April 24, 1916.

