



WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS - EASTER, 1916

DR. JOGESHKUMAR M. PUROHIT

(M.A., Ph. D.)

Head & Asso. Professor,

Department of English,

Vijaynagar Arts College,

Vijaynagar - 383460 (Sabarkantha)

(GJ) INDIA

ABSTRACT

In "Easter 1916," Yeats asserts that Ireland and its people have been "changed utterly"(79). Yeats memorializes the individuals who sacrificed their lives in the Easter Rebellion as a tribute their ability to transform themselves and the history of Ireland. Through "A terrible beauty"(16) of rebellion and chaos, the leaders of the Easter Rebellion and Irish people assert their coming of age. In "Easter 1916," Yeats suggests that Ireland had to affirm its independence and national identity through rebellion and the passionate pursuit of change.

EASTER, 1916

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

*I have met them at the close of the 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 10
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club
Being certain that they and I*

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*But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.*

*That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill. 20
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. 30*

*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 know 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. 40*

*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*



Changes minute by minute, 50

A horse-hoof slides on the brim,

And a horse splashes 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.

Too long a sacrifice

Can make a stone of the heart.

O when may it suffice?

That is Heaven's part, our part 60

To murmur name upon name,

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;

Was it needless death after all?

For England may keep faith

For all that is done and said.

We know their dream; enough 70

To know they dreamed and are dead;

And what if excess of love

Bewildered them till they died?

I write it 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. 80

In the first stanza, Yeats alludes to the Ireland's stagnant history beset with "polite meaningless words"(6). Yeats illustrates the insignificance of these apathetic people through his inability to acknowledge them with little more than a few civil utterances. As a mirage of lethargic figures conforming to their individual lives, they are a trivial population who live in a state of disillusionment. Although Yeats portrays these individuals as despondent figures,



he asserts that through the events of "Easter 1916" they have "All changed, changed utterly"(15). Through rebellion against the established ruling class, Yeats establishes that the people of Ireland have asserted their independence and identity in order to procure their coming of age.

Yeats refers to the significant figures of the Easter Rebellion to suggest that all Irishmen have the ability and the responsibility to evoke change. Rather than merely praise the lives of these Irish martyrs, Yeats illustrates their humanity and imperfections in order to convey that heroic events are not instigated by the brave and infallible individuals but by average citizens who passionately pursue change and justice. Yeats asserts the need for individuals to take responsibility for the condition of Ireland and actively affirm their Irish identity.

Yeats illustrates the inevitability of change through natural imagery in stanza four. Yeats portrays the stone as a symbol of permanence and immobility and the stream as a symbol of change. Yeats maintains that the people of Ireland have been "Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream"(43). They remain stagnant and afraid of change while "A shadow of cloud on the stream / Changes minute by minute"(49-50). Yeats implies that throughout history English colonies have fallen and declared their independence while Ireland has remained apathetic and unchanged: "Minute by minute they live: The stone in the midst of all"(55-56). In order to achieve a sense of Irish identity and come of age, Yeats affirms that Ireland must abandon the conformity of the stone and pursue change.

In the midst of his appeal to Ireland to embrace change, Yeats questions the significance of these individuals in that "Was it needless death after all?"(7). In the sixth stanza, Yeats maintains that the sacrifice made by these individuals would only be needless if the change procured by these events was lost and forgotten. In order to promote the memory of these individuals and appeal to the Irish people to continue these works of change and independence, Yeats writes "it out in a verse- / MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse"(74-76). Yeats confirms the significance of their sacrifice in that "Wherever green is worn, / Are changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born"(78-80). Through their ability to instigate change in their individual lives and in the Irish people, these figures of the Easter Rebellion initiated Ireland's coming of age. Although Ireland must continue to pursue change, Yeats asserts that "Easter 1916" has established "A terrible beauty" that could instigate a unified effort for Irish independence or could eventually revert back to Ireland's conformity to English rule.

In "Easter 1916," Yeats uses the meter of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. The rhyme scheme of the poem alternates rhyming lines in an ABAB form. Yeats varies this structure in order to emphasize specific elements of the poem's content and significance.



In stanzas one and three, Yeats predominately uses iambic tetrameter to structure the rhythm of the poem. Although the majority of these stanzas demonstrate iambic tetrameter, lines 6, 8, 11, and 15 contain a trimeter rhythm. Yeats emphasizes these lines to convey the triviality of conformity and the change that has developed in Ireland.

In stanzas two, four, five, and six; the rhythm maintains a meter of iambic trimeter. This more condensed form illustrates Yeats's ability to convey numerous ideas, images, and themes into concise language. Yeats portrays human characters in stanza two, natural images in stanza four, philosophical ideals in stanza five, and resolves all these ideas in stanza six. Yeats's ability to maintain a consistent meter and rhyme supports his transition through numerous images and ideas and emphasizes the connection among the multiple ideas in the poem.

Although the meter and rhyme allow for a sense of consistency throughout the poem, the lines in which the structure deviates enhances the overall meaning of the poem. In stanza five, Yeats deviates from the meter and rhyme patterns to emphasize the loss of life that had to occur in the pursuit of change and identity. Lines 60 and 67 revert to the iambic tetrameter rhythm in order to emphasize the sacrifice made by the leaders of the Easter Rebellion. Yeats also has the rhyme scheme deviate from the ABAB pattern in order to emphasize the finitude of the word death.

Yeats's mastery of language expands his ability to convey the significance of his message. Through a consistency in form, Yeats maintains a sense of unity; but by allowing for deviations in this structure, he further emphasizes particular elements of the poem to convey Ireland's coming of age through the pursuit of change and identity.

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