

# Commemoration of the rebels in william butler yeats's poem easter 1916

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## **A Fight till the Death**

In “Easter 1916,” by William Butler Yeats, the death of Irish revolutionaries is mourned in a rather unusual way. Instead of specifically focusing on the good impacts that the rebels had on Ireland throughout the poem, Yeats slowly builds upon the actions of the rebels, as if he is convincing himself that the rising was an asset to Irish liberation. In the poem, Yeats commemorates the rebels for fighting for what they believe in through lyrical poetic imagery and finds emotional consolation through the fact that the memories of the rebels will live on through history.

Yeats mourns the death of the rebels who fought for Ireland’s independence from Britain, but not in the way that most elegies, such as *In Memoriam*, do. In the beginning of the poem, Yeats describes how he is not particularly fond of his fellow citizens by only making small talk when a mere nod was not acceptable. As he continues the poem, Yeats goes on to describe the personalities of some of the rebels, without mentioning any names until the fourth stanza.

Names are used as the primary way to identify a person and without even mentioning the names until the second half of the poem Yeats denies the rebels the praise that they deserve. Instead, he criticizes the movement as a whole because it altered the way of living in Ireland and hurt people close to him as well. In the second stanza, Yeats writes about how MacBride was a drunk who ended up hurting someone he used to be close to. Yet, as the poem continues, Yeats puts aside his own feelings because the rebels

started a movement and he commemorates them for their determination and patriotism towards Ireland.

In the third stanza, Yeats uses lyrical nature imagery to compare the hearts of the revolutionaries to a rock. The revolutionaries are stubborn and determined despite all the different obstacles they encounter. Even though the British army was a lot larger and stronger than that of the rebels, they put their life on the line and stood for what they believed in. As everything around them was changing, with regards to WWI, the revolutionaries were in the midst of it. Even though many of the revolutionaries either died in the war or were executed for treason, they initiated a movement that eventually led to “A terrible beauty [to be] born”—a sense of Irish nationalism throughout.

Although some may believe that by “terrible,” Yeats is referring to the violence caused by the war and the “beauty” in it was the freedom that Ireland gained, only half of that is true. By saying that during Easter of 1916, “A terrible beauty is born,” Yeats is drawing a parallel to the joy found in a tragedy, and describing how awe-inspiring the pride and dedication the rebels had toward Ireland was—that they would risk their life for their country. As the phrase is repeated throughout the poem it shows what too much pride can do to people but also how nationalism can cause something beautiful to be born.

Even though the revolt failed in its attempt to break from British rule, it started a movement that eventually led to the freedom of Ireland. This poem describes how normal people contributed to the fight for freedom and

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praises their courage to fight to their death, even if the odds were not in their favor. By mourning the dead in these ways, Yeats is able to create an elegy that praises the rising of something beautiful instead of writing about something that is dead and gone.