

W.b. yeats – ‘easter 1916’



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Contrary to the optimistic nature of the title, "Easter 1916", Yeats' poem speaks of death, sacrifice, rebellion and politics. It is not often that Yeats deals with the subject of the Irish Independence movement. The only other expressly political poem he wrote was "September 1913", which also dealt with the Irish Independence Movement. Thus, the topical rarity of the poem, written by an almost politically disinclined Yeats, simply begs the reader for close analysis.

Firstly, Yeats uses iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter in the poem. The rhyme scheme of the poem alternates rhyming lines in an ABAB form as well. Yeats varies the structure in order to emphasize the importance of the poem's content and significance. In stanza 1, Yeats uses a mixture of iambic tetrameter and a trimeter rhythm to bring out the subtle discord in the Irish population. The lines, "I have met them at the close of the day /Coming with vivid faces /From counter or desk among grey/ Eighteenth-century houses" (lines 1-4) are written in steady iambic tetrameter as is the most of the stanza. However, certain lines which Yeats slides subtly in the middle such as "Or polite meaningless words" or "To please a companion" and "All changed, changed utterly:" are in trimeter rhythm, breaking the consistency of the stanza and slowing it down a little, making the reader aware of the underlying discord in the supposed normalcy and mundane nature of life that Yeats describes. This, perhaps, is Yeats way of 'foreshadowing' the rebellion he discusses in the next few stanzas, hence preparing the reader for a turn of events.

Secondly, the most prominent tool Yeats uses in the poem is the change of tone. In the first stanza, the persona adopts a dismissive, almost mocking

tone towards those involved in the Independence cause. When the persona states that " I have passed with a nod of the head/ Or polite meaningless words", it implies that he does not, in fact, care much for these people that are a insignificant part of his life. In stanza 2, his tone becomes almost mocking when he says, " That woman's days were spent / In ignorant good-will /Her nights in argument / Until her voice grew shrill". In those lines, he describes Countess Constance Georgina Markiewicz, a prominent female Irish nationalist that he seems to dislike and mock by calling her ' ignorant' and ' shrill'. His distance from the cause is brought across through the dominant tone in the first two stanzas, but that is subject to change in the next few stanzas.

In the next few stanzas, the persona's tone changes. It is quite an obvious shift from dismissive and mockery to empathy for those involved in the Independence cause. The poem states, " Was it needless death after all?", highlighting the shift in the persona's opinion. Now he seems empathetic to those who gave their lives for the cause. Moreover, he goes on to talk about the heroes who died in the war - " MacDonagh and MacBride /And Connolly and Pearse" - who were nationalists that died in the rebellion as well.

Speaking about them specifically glorifies them in the reader's eyes, making the reader see a definite shift in tone from stanzas one and two. The persona now empathizes with the nationalists and has perhaps even integrated himself with the cause for freedom.

Thirdly, the refrain used also adds another dimension of meaning to the poem. After starting the poem with a very calm, mellow beginning, Yeats abruptly shifts the poem's almost-soothing nature to a dramatic one in lines

15 and 16 - " All changed, changed utterly/A terrible beauty is born." These words, repeated in the last stanza, make the reader slightly uncomfortable. It is projected like an ominous prediction of the future, casting a gloomy shadow over the rest of the poem. " A terrible beauty" in this case - I believe - refers to the outcome of the rebellion and what it cost the Irish to achieve a tiny measure of success in their Independence movement. The dramatic nature of the words " changed, changed utterly" and " terrible beauty" in the following line, dramatizes the entire event and makes the reader see just how extensively the persona's emotions have changed since the first stanza.

Yeats also uses natural imagery to emphasize just how fleeting the changes in Ireland (mostly political) are. In stanza three, the persona seems to be reminiscing with the thought that all life is temporary and fleeting. In the lines " Minute by minute they change;/A shadow of cloud on the stream/Changes minutes by minute" (lines 48-50), an undeniably calm yet quick change is felt by the reader as the images take root in their minds. The reader begins to see Ireland as a political entity with factions that are changing quickly due to discontent amongst the masses. Every second, someone new is being converted to the nationalist cause and the ' shadow of cloud' lifts as more people come together for the same cause. The natural imagery of the cloud and stream provides a lever through which Yeats conveys the quick political changes in Ireland.

In the next paragraph, Yeats' real emotional reaction about the Easter rebellion comes through as he begins to question whether all the death has been in vain. In his words, " Was it needless death after all" (line 67) and " Too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart/O when may it suffice"

(lines 57-59), indicating that he's reflecting on the deaths and the cause of it. His tone becomes almost thoughtful. Before, he had been dismissive and mocking. As the stanza continues, a very tangible and drastic change occurs. From lines 65 to 66, the thoughtfulness leaks away and his empathy for the dead shines through. He says, "What is it but nightfall?/ No, no, not night but death" (lines 65-66) and "For England may keep faith/For all that is done and said" (line 68), expressing his hope that those dead have not died in vain and Ireland might actually get its independence. Perhaps it also does seem as though the persona's support might have been won over by the rebellion and the sacrifices made.

The last stanza is a very effective sum-up of the entire poem. It gives the reader a 'full-circle' effect. The poem starts out as a calm and soothing one (describing mundane life) and it seems to end that way as well. The last two lines "Are changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born" is a repetition from stanza two. When the lines are repeated, the impact that they had previously is lost and they become a pale imitation of how they were used before. With those closing words, sadness and grief envelops the poem, making the overall vibe of the poem very solemn indeed.