

W. B. Yeats

Easter 1916

This poem deals with the Dublin Rebellion of Easter 1916 which is believed to have been the beginning of modern Ireland, in spite of its immediate failure. Yeats was in Dublin when it happened, and though at first he was against the violence and the bloodshed that accompanied it and he thought the sacrifice of its leaders wasteful, he sympathized with the rebels when sixteen of them were executed.

In Stanza One the poet describes the previous lives of the rebels to suggest that they were average or normal citizens who sacrificed their lives for the sake of Irish independence. They were normal Irish people with "vivid faces" and he used to meet them with a nod of the head or saying polite meaningless words. However, he shared with them the love of Ireland:

Be certain that they and I
But lived where motely is worn

The word "motely" means colourful dress which symbolizes Irish people. The stanza ends with "a terrible beauty is born" which may allude to the Birth of Hellen of Troy, Maud Gonne and Ireland because Irish independence will be accompanied by violence and bloodshed.

In Stanza Two the poet mentions some of the significant rebels beginning with "that woman" which refers to Maud Gonne, the most beautiful woman in Ireland according to Yeats who was with the rebels; she was imprisoned in England after the rising but she escaped to Dublin in 1918. Because of her interest in Irish independence and in politics and argument, her beautiful voice became shrill. He then mentions a school master (Patrick Pearse) who was interested in poetry or in the "winged horse" of imagination: "rode our winged horse". His helper and friend (MacDunagh) was with him and he was sensitive, daring and with sweet thought. The fourth rebel to be mentioned is MacBride. He is negatively mentioned as a drunken, vainglorious (proud) lout (ruffian) because:

He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart

MacBride and Maud Gonne were married in 1902 but they were separated in 1905. This man, too, has been changed towards effecting change in Ireland; independence from England. The stanza also ends with "A terrible beauty is born" suggesting that the Rising was accompanied with violence and bloodshed like the beauty of Helen of Troy. In this stanza Yeats refers to the significant figures of the Easter Rising to suggest that all the Irish people

When hearts are with one purpose only, they turn into a stone that troubles the flow of the living stream like throwing a stone into a river; it will disturb the river waters and the birds that swim in it. The image of the stone is a symbol of permanence and stability while the stream and the cloud are symbols of change. Yeats intends to say that the people of Ireland remained stagnant and afraid of change like stones. In contrast with the image of the stone and through natural imagery in Stanza Four Yeats suggests the inevitability of change. Everything in nature, the clouds, the birds, the animals, and the moor-hens change minute by minute only the stone amid them remains unchangeable. This means that nations around Ireland change while Ireland remains without change.

In the last stanza Yeats ask "Was it needles death after all? The answer is, of course, evident. Yeats confirms the significance of their death when he mentions some of the rebels by name to immortalize their sacrifice for the sake of Ireland. He asserts that after Easter 1916, "a terrible beauty is born" because Irish people will continue their struggle for Irish independence.

THEMES:

The main theme of this poem is the Easter Rising of 1916. Yeats was against the bloodshed that accompanied this rising at the beginning but when the rebels were executed he sympathized with them as heroes who sacrificed themselves for the great Irish cause. He immortalized them in his poem.