Easter, 1916 by William Butler Yeats

'Easter, 1916' - Key takeaways

- William Butler Yeats wrote 'Easter, 1916' in 1916, but he published it in his collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921.
- 'Easter, 1916' is about the Easter Uprising in Dublin, Ireland that took place against Great Britain in 1916. The Poet, though not a supporter of the Uprising, to begin with, understood the significance of the event and memorialized several people he knew that were killed either during or after the insurrection.
- There are several common themes in 'Easter, 1916' including, but not limited to, natural imagery, heroism, and spiritual exploration.
- There are several well-known symbols from 'Easter, 1916', but the most notable are both the stone presented in stanza three and the motley and green clothing discussed throughout.
- ‘Easter, 1916’ is a reflection on the events surrounding the Easter Rising, an armed insurrection that began in Dublin on Easter Monday, April 24, 1916.
- “Easter, 1916” describes the Easter Rising. After they surrendered, the remaining rebels were shot by the firing squad or executed by hanging. 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.*'

- The Uprising was unsuccessful. The insurrection lasted only a week before Britain regained complete control, and over 2,000 people were killed. Despite little initial support for the Uprising from the Irish population, the execution of the leaders of the Uprising turned them into martyrs. After the Easter Uprising was quashed, the Irish people began seeing those that fought as having made a valiant sacrifice. In 1921 a treaty was signed that went into effect 1922, establishing Ireland as the Irish Free State, which became the Republic of Ireland that exists today.

Summary

Easter, 1916 opens with Yeats remembering the rebels as he passed them on the street. Before the Rising, they were ordinary people working 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 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 with a note of ambivalence and futility, reflecting Yeats's 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, yet with their deaths, the situation has transformed "All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born."

Analysis of *Easter, 1916*

Stanza One

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 of *Easter, 1916* 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. Certain phrases, such as” mocking tale or gibe” also speak to the poet’s tone towards the subjects. These words in particular are intentionally strange and are meant to make a reader question why they are being used. It is clear Yeats, or at least his speaker, has a complicated relationship with the Rising and those who participated.

Toward the end of the stanza, Yeats introduces the subtle, but powerful, the 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, multi-colored 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 from 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 "winged horse" of romantic imagination.

Stanza Two

In the second stanza of *Easter, 1916*, 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 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 the 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" whom 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 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 whom MacBride married.

Stanza Three

The third stanza of *Easter, 1916* 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,

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

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 that do change. They contrast the rebels' hearts.

The third stanza shows the speaker's ambivalence about the Easter Rising by using nature imagery. The natural state of the world is compared to a "living stream." It ebbs and flows "through summer and winter." Yet the heart of these revolutionaries stands still as if "enchanted to a stone." There is something unnatural about the revolutionary's heart. Unlike the "show of cloud" which "changes minute by minute," the stone stands still. It does not live "minute by minute" like the "moor-hens" or the "horse." It does not move at all.

"A terrible Beauty is Born" micro-analysis: W. B. Yeats repeated the **refrain** "A terrible beauty is born" in all stanzas except the third. Why the deviation from the refrain? The third stanza concentrates on the consistency and determination of the rebel cause during the Easter Uprising through the symbol of the stone. The deviation from the refrain allows the immovable nature of the stone to stand out even further.

Additionally, "A terrible beauty is born" is an **oxymoronic** phrase that is one of Yeats' most famous. "Terrible" and "beauty" can be seen as opposite phrases in this line, seemingly contradictory to one another. The horrific events of the Easter Rising can be described as "terrible", but the strength of heart of those who led the cause is "beautiful".

This plays into the concept of the **sublime**, a commonly explored concept of the time. When one is experiencing the **sublime**, there is tension present between the smallness of the human self and body, and the vastness of the universe, which can be both horrific and blissful.

Oxymoron is a literary device that can instill conflicting emotions in the readers of a text, and Yeats is almost certainly employing it as such in 'Easter, 1916'.

Stanza Four

In the final stanza of *Easter, 1916*, Yeats asks a 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 parliament. The granting of independence had been set aside during World War I because the English required Irish support for the war.

In the second stanza, Yeats introduced the idea of “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 *Easter,*

1916, Yeats reconciles himself to the fact that "wherever green is worn," people will remember the sacrifices of the rebels of 1916.

Hence, the speaker says that "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart." He suggests that sacrificing oneself for a cause like this is too much of a burden. He also says that "England may keep the faith" with its promise to grant Home Rule to Ireland, which would mean that all the sacrifice and death of the Easter Rising was unnecessary. He suggests that an "excess of love" for their country and their ideals has "bewildered" these revolutionaries. Yet the poem ends with the confirmation that they are still worth being remembered. The speaker suggests that "our part [is]/To murmur name upon the name" as a mother might say her child's name while rocking it to sleep. Then the poem names four of the rebels: Patrick Pearse (poet, educator, and commander-in-chief of the Irish Republican Brotherhood), James Connolly (leader of the Irish Citizen Army Volunteers), Thomas MacDonagh (activist and writer), and John MacBride (major in the Irish Republican Army and ex-husband of Yeats's friend Maud Gonne). The speaker says that "now and in time to be," these four men will be remembered, "Wherever green is worn." The poem then ends with the same refrain: "changed, changed utterly:/A terrible beauty is born."

Poetic Form

Genre - Lyric poetry, romantic poetry, political poetry, modernism.

Form / Style - Four alternating 16- and 24-line stanzas; Loose iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter.

Rhyme Scheme - Alternating rhyming lines in ABAB 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.