UNIT 5: W.B. YEATS: "EASTER 1916"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this poem, you will be able to:

- give a detailed summary of the poem "Easter 1916"
- explain the context of the poem
- describe the poetic technique employed by W.B. Yeats
- analyse the poem critically

5.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall deal with the poem "Easter 1916" by W. B. Yeats. We are familiar with the poet from our reading of the previous unit. Therefore, here the poem "Easter 1916 will be discussed in broad details so as to enable you to appreciate the text of the poem.

5.3 TEXT OF THE POEM

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

This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vain glorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number 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.

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;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes 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
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
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out 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

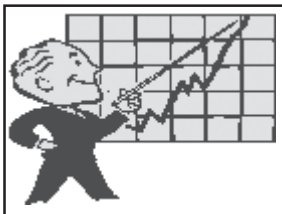
5.4 CONTEXT OF THE POEM

The poem "Easter 1916" was written sometime between May and September 1916 and depicts Yeats' mixed emotions towards the Easter Uprising in Ireland against British rule on 24th April, 1916. The Uprising was unsuccessful and the Irish revolutionaries involved with the movement were executed for treason by the British government. Although a staunch and committed nationalist, Yeats was a little wary of violent uprisings and the poem

describes very well Yeats' torn emotions regarding the entire event of the uprising. While Yeats does not seem to be completely supportive of the violence of the movement and initially in the first paragraphs tries to distance himself from the revolutionaries and the movement, he gradually seems to change his mind as the poem progresses and believes that even though the uprising was unsuccessful it led to the birth of a "terrible beauty". There is an ambiguous feeling throughout the poem where Yeats seems to be trying to figure out how he feels about the entire event exactly. There is a feeling that even though Yeats was not completely one with the event, he believes that it was an important event in the history of Irish nationalism that will always be remembered.

The poem first appeared almost five years after it was composed in Yeats' poetry collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921.

Yeats for the most part in the poem sticks to the form of iambic tetrameter with a simple abab rhyme scheme with occasional switches to iambic trimeter. The learners are encouraged to read up on the meters and forms and identify them in relation to the poem.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What did the poet try to depict through his poem?

Q2. What is the rhyme scheme of the poem?

5.5 EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

The poem begins by a description of the people who he would randomly meet at the "end of day" with whom he had a very superficial relationship. He would make small talk and exchange "polite meaningless words" without paying much attention or importance to these conversations or to these people. Yeats then goes on to describe specific people involved with the event and even here the ambiguous unsure tone of the poet is not abandoned, however there seems to be a change in tone from the first stanza where he totally dismisses the people with "polite meaningless words".

Yeats continues into the third stanza and compares these revolutionaries

and their dedication to an unmoving rock at the bottom of a stream. The stream is constantly moving and the nature around it everywhere too keeps changing while the rock stays put in its place, with a strong will and unchanging dedication, like the revolutionaries and their unmoving dedication towards the cause of Irish independence. Towards the end, it seems Yeats is not exactly sure how much he admires the people he mentions together with their sacrifice for a lost cause. However, he definitely has learned to respect them and their sense of conviction in what they believed in.

Yeats closes the poem with the phrase "A terrible beauty is born," which he has repeated several times in the poem. The phrase serves as a refrain and it helps reconnect to the title of the poem in every stanza. It also closes the poem by suggesting that even though the deaths of the "Easter Uprising" are terrible, history tends to remember bloody battles and self-sacrifice more than anything else. So with regard to being remembered, there is kind of a terrible beauty in the death that came out of Easter, 1916.

Let us go through the poem in detail, one stanza at a time, to understand it better.

STANZA 1

I have met them at close of 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
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,

Being certain that they and I

But lived where motley is worn:

All changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.

Yeats begins the poem by talking about the people he would usually meet at "close of day", that is, the end of a working day, towards the evening from wherever they worked be it behind counters and desks or stores and offices amidst old houses. Their vivid faces must be a result of their finishing work for the day. He then goes on to describe his usual exchanges of conversation with these people that do not consist of anything more than polite greetings exchanged as a matter of social courtesy. The repetition of the phrase "polite meaningless words" in this stanza seeks to reinforce the idea that Yeats does not think much of these people or his meetings with them although he would sometime linger around and crack a joke or tell a funny story sitting at the club. What the poet wishes to stress on, is the absolute superficiality with which he would associate with these people and the unimportance he attaches to his associations with them. The student would probably notice that till now Yeats does not mention who these people are or what their connection is to the title of the poem. That can be seen as intentional on the part of the poet as he wishes to reveal what the poem is all about slowly and gradually. This ambiguity can also be seen as reflecting the poet's unsure mind regarding the events that he wishes to describe in the poem. The reference to "motley" by Yeats seeks to reinforce the ideas of silly and clownish superficiality. Motley refers to the patchwork of colours that would traditionally be worn by a jester or an old fashioned clown. He seems to describe his social life as being funny, silly and unimportant.

The last two lines seem to have a change in tone from the silly and superficial towards something dark and realistic. It is only after Yeats writes "*All changed, changed utterly*," that one can guess that Yeats now will somehow connect to the title of the poem and talk about the violent Easter Uprising and hence the line that says that everything had changed from the previous order of superficial social life. With the final line in the stanza which

is repeated throughout the poem, Yeats uses a technique called foreshadowing which is a term used for hints that a text offers us as to what might be expected soon. Yeats keeps us in suspense by saying that "a terrible beauty is born" because we are not sure of what it exactly means but we can guess as to the fact that it refers to the bloody battle of 1916 and we can expect a change in the narrative or a twist in the sequence of events.

STANZA 2

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
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.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vain glorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number 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.

Yeats in this stanza goes on to talk about specific people rather than the generalized ones from the first stanza. He first goes on to talk about a woman who he does not name but reading the poem and its context will reveal that here he is probably referring to Countess Constance Markievicz, one of the most important people behind the Easter Uprising. She was arrested after the Uprising and was sentenced to death however she was not executed but served a life sentence. The ambivalence felt by Yeats towards the Revolt is apparent in these lines as we do not see him showering praises on the woman who gave up her life for this cause. "Ignorant good will" seems to suggest that her dedication to the cause was naïve and uninformed. Yeats also seems to make a case for what ideal femininity must be like. He seems to suggest that her political activities led her astray from her ideal feminine virtues and led her to the violent path of revolutions when he says "her voice grew shrill" from how sweet and feminine it was earlier when she lived an ideal feminine aristocratic life. "Rode to harriers" is a typical English phrase which means a woman riding a horse on a hunt for rabbits. It was a typically aristocratic thing to do and serves here as a symbol for rich beauty. Yeats seems to suggest that that was what was ideal for women and not taking part in bloody revolutions. Yeats does not exactly espouse any power to women here and reinforces old traditional homely virtues for women.

Yeats now mentions a person who kept a school and "rode our winged horse". It must be noted here that Yeats expected people to get his references when the poem was published as the memory of the Easter Uprising was still fresh in the minds of people in Ireland. However for us reading the poem in entirely different times and contexts, a little bit of research into who these people were, seems necessary. Reading up on this reveals to us that the person referred to here is probably Padraic Pearse who was also one of the leaders of the Revolt. He had founded a boys' school in Dublin and was a poet. The phrase "winged horse" refers to the mythical beast Pegasus who was the ancient symbol for poet in Greek myths. Thus by referring to the man being a poet by using a phrase like "winged horse", Yeats is using a technique called Symbolism. Yeats then goes on to speak in a similar vein about another person who may be identified as Thomas Macdonagh. He too was a poet and a dramatist involved with the Uprising. Yeats feels sorry for him as he had a

future in writing ("Was coming into his force; He might have won fame in the end,") and his associations with the Uprising cut short his talent and life as a poet.

The next person Yeats mentions is Major MacBride who was a leader with the Revolution. Yeats had a personal association with him as he was the man Maud Gonne married and later separated from after having rejected Yeats' marriage proposal. Yeats was naturally not fond of this man and he seems to use the harshest phrase in the entire poem to describe him, "drunken vain glorious lout". "He had done most bitter wrong,To some who are near my heart," clearly reveals to us the context and the people as being MacBride and Maud Gonne. However Yeats seems to overcome his personal animosity with the man to mention him in his poem when he says "Yet I number him in the song;".Yeats seems to suggest that having died for the cause of the Revolt seems to have changed him utterly as future generations would view him as important and as a hero, however the way Yeats finishes the poem by saying that "He, too, has resigned his part/ In the casual comedy;" seems to reinforce Yeats' ambivalence about the entire event. "Casual Comedy" seems to suggest almost an element of silliness around the entire event although he again stresses on the fact that no matter what he thinks or believes, the events surrounding the Uprising had changed everything and it indeed gave birth to "a terrible beauty".



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Describe in brief the technique of foreshadowing by Yeats in the poem.

Q4. Whom does Yeats refer to as the "drunken vainglorious lout"?

STANZA 3

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;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes 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.

There is a noticeable change in tone in this stanza as Yeats seems to adopt a more serious voice. Yeats compares here the hearts of the Irish revolutionaries to a stone. Although, it may seem to have connotations of being cold and ruthless but what Yeats wants to portray with the imagery of the stone is unmoving unchanging dedication. He suggests that the cause and dedication of the revolutionaries is unchanging and tireless. He says the revolutionaries' hearts are filled with an intense passion and are dedicated to a single cause unchanging with the seasons and are the same through summer and winter although the world around them and all its surroundings may keep changing. The change in voice and tone can be gauged by the fact that by comparing their dedication to an unmoving stone, gives the Uprising and its revolutionaries a certain importance and respect that had been missing in the earlier stanzas.

Yeats then goes on to describe all that changes in nature with a lot of imagery drawn from nature. He talks of horses and riders, clouds and birds that all keep changing by the minute in contrast to the dedication of the revolutionaries symbolised by a rock at the bottom of a stream. The stream keeps flowing and changing but the rock remains unmoved. He seems to say that the world goes on and changes but nothing can change the dedication of the fighters of the revolution as they died for a cause.

STANZA 4

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
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
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out 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

Yeats adopts a meditative tone and wishes to reflect upon the entire event. He had been stressing upon the dedicated unchanging stone like quality of the revolutionaries but now he seems to wonder if all that sacrifice would be enough when he says "Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart./ O when may it suffice?"

Yeats seems to say that it is not up to him or the people to decide what may "suffice" but that it is "heaven's part". He suggests only fate and history shall decide when true independence may be achieved and when all will sacrifice be enough. The best that people can do is to *"murmur name upon name"*, i.e., mourn the people who have died for the cause as mothers would weep for children who finally "sleep" after having "run wild". In other words, he suggests that we can do nothing to stop the bloody cycle of history but the only power we have is to mourn the dead who died for this.

Yeats now goes on to talk about death and asks if this was "needless death after all". England had promised Ireland freedom but went back on their word when the World War started. However, they had still promised them freedom after the War. The Revolution seems less glorious now seen in this light that had Ireland waited two more years they might have received independence but they decided to win freedom through violent uprising in 1916 which was thwarted and the revolutionaries tried and sentenced for treason.

Yeats now says that despite the doubts about the Uprising and its requirement or consequences, the one thing that is for certain is "their dream" to win independence and the cause that they were willing to die for and this itself is praiseworthy. Yeats reverts back to his ambiguity regarding the entire event when he suggests that it is "excess love" for their country that "bewildered" them and perhaps led them astray on the violent path.

Finally, it seems the best the poet Yeats could do about his entire dilemma regarding the Uprising is to commit it to verse, I write it out in a verse – "It" here refers to Yeats' entire thought process regarding the Uprising that has been evolving throughout the poem. He then goes on to name in a list the main people behind the Uprising and says that these people have been transformed by their selfless sacrifice for their country and its independence because of which they will be remembered forever in Ireland's history. This is something Yeats knows he is not a part of, and he does not totally know how to feel about that. Yeats finishes the poem with the same refrain and a certain amount of uncertainty regarding the entire event where he refrains from unabashedly

calling the Uprising a glorious success but also claims that the revolutionaries did not die for nothing as their contributions to Irish independence will go down in history.

5.6 POETIC TECHNIQUES

Yeats' poetry is symbolic in the sense that the images and structures that he uses in them allude to symbols and thoughts well beyond what is conveyed literally. While his Modernist contemporaries experimented with free verse, Yeats stuck to more traditional forms. That is not to say that he was wary of change. His style evolved from the conventional form of poetic diction to one more ascetic in language and direct in its approach to themes. The young Yeats' poetry borrowed unabashedly from Irish folklore and critics uncharitably agree that it is stilted and over-elaborative in its deployment of words. The Yeats of the middle period wrote poetry that was pithier in diction, realistic and more open to the use of colloquial speech. Some see the pithiness as a bad thing and do not take kindly to the sparseness that characterised this middle period's verse, seeing it as barren. Having lived through turbulent times, the mature Yeats searches for anchorage in poems like "Sailing to Byzantium". But his zest for life continues to exist alongside it, therefore leading to an inner conflict expressed in the poems of the later period. His later works grow increasingly personal and the Yeats of the later period contemplates on the ageing self. Structural succinctness, the complex nature and variety of the moods expressed, rhythmic mastery and a remarkable use of common poetic diction to connote complex ideas- all point to William Butler Yeats' maturity as a poet.



LET US KNOW

Myth and history constitute an important aspect of Yeats' poetry. "Easter 1916", "The Second Coming", "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and "Leda and Swan" are all based on myth and history.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. How does Yeats react to the Uprising as seen in the poem?

Q6. What do Yeats' early poems reflect?



5.7 LET US SUM UP

We have learnt about the important figure of English literature namely, W.B. Yeats by reading about his life and works and the context in which he wrote. We have discussed Yeats' influences and interests and his contributions to English poetry. The unit also discussed his style of writing and his major works. His poem "Easter 1916" has been broadly explained in the unit, which shall further stir your interest in exploring Yeats' poetry.



5.8 FURTHER READING

1. Dattatreya, Poduri. (2000) *W. B. Yeats: Poet and Dramatist.* Jaipur: Pointer Publisher.

2. Larrisy, Edward. (1998) *W. B. Yeats.* United Kingdom: NorthCote House

3. Singh, M. P. (2003) *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Politics.* Atlantic: U.K.



5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1 : The poem "Easter 1916" depicts Yeats' mixed emotions towards the Easter Uprising in Ireland against British rule on 24th April, 1916.

Ans to Q2 : abab rhyme scheme.

Ans to Q3 : Yeats uses a technique called foreshadowing which is a term used for hints that a text offers us as to what might be expected soon. Yeats keeps us in suspense by saying that "a terrible beauty is born" because we are not sure of what it exactly means but we can guess as to the fact that it refers to the bloody battle of 1916.

Ans to Q4 : Yeats refers to Major MacBride, a leader with the Revolution as the "drunken vain glorious lout. Maud Gonne, Yeats' unrequited love, was married to MacBride and thereforeYeats uses the harshest phrase in the entire poem to describe him.

Ans to Q5 : The best the poet Yeats could do about his entire dilemma regarding the Uprising is to commit it to verse, I write it out in a verse – "It" here refers to Yeats' entire thought process regarding the Uprising. He then goes on to name the main people behind the Uprising who have been transformed by their selfless sacrifice for their country and its independence and will be remembered forever in Ireland's history. Yeats finishes the poem with the same refrain and a certain amount of uncertainty regarding the entire event where he refrains from unabashedly calling the Uprising a glorious success but also claims that the revolutionaries did not die for nothing as their contributions to Irish independence will go down in history.

Ans to Q6 : The young Yeats' poetry borrowed unabashedly from Irish folklore and critics uncharitably agree that it is stilted and over-elaborative in its deployment of words.



5.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Give a critical appreciation of the poem "Easter 1916" by W. B. Yeats.

Q2. Write a note on Yeats' techniques as seen in the poem "Easter 1916".

Q3. Discuss the background of the poem "Easter 1916".

Q4. Write down the summary of the poem in your own words.

Q5. Explain the following extracts with reference to the context:

a) "That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill."

b) "Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part"

c) "I write it out 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"

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