

## Notes on Easter 1916 by W.B. Yeats:

Yeats starts the poem off by talking about the dudes he runs into in the street when the shops and offices are closing up around Dublin. He basically makes superficial small talk with them, saying "polite meaningless words" (6). And every now and then, he'll tell a funny story that might get a laugh at the bar. But he doesn't really value his interactions with any of these people. So yeah—dude's a bit of a snooty jerk.

Next, Yeats breaks off and starts going through a list of all the people who were involved with the Easter Uprising of 1916. He mentions a woman who helped out with the effort, along with some other guys who might have had bright futures if they hadn't gotten themselves executed for treason. One guy was even responsible for hurting people close to Yeats, and Yeats didn't think much of him. But still, Yeats is getting a little uncertain about his superiority, and is starting to wonder if these people he's mentioning might actually be heroes.

As he continues, Yeats compares these fighters and their unchanging dedication to a rock that sitting at the bottom of a stream. The stream and the nature around it keep changing, but the stone remains unmoved. At the end of the day, Yeats isn't sure how much he admires the people he's talking about. But he definitely has learned to respect them and the sacrifice they made for something they believed in.

Yeats closes the poem by repeating the phrase "A terrible beauty is born," which he's mentioned several times in the poem. Basically, this phrase 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 regards to being remembered, there's kind of a terrible beauty in the death that came out of Easter, 1916.

### Lines 1-4

I have met them at close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.

Yeats starts the poem off by talking about some people whom he's met at the "close of day" or the end of the business day (probably 5pm-ish). These folks are probably happy to be off work, so they come with "vivid faces" from wherever they work, whether it's behind a "desk" or "counter" at a store among some grey old houses.

As you can imagine, Yeats the fancy-pants poet sort of thinks he's above these common people who work regular jobs. If Yeats is ever going to sit behind a desk, it's going to be on his own terms as a poet.

At this point, we're still not totally sure what Yeats' title means for this poem. All we know is that he tends to run into people he knows (or more likely, people who know him) at the end of the business day in Dublin. Not much to go on so far.

### Lines 5-8

I have passed with a nod of the head

Or polite meaningless words,  
Or have lingered awhile and said  
Polite meaningless words,

Here, Yeats takes his snobbery up a notch and mentions how he's passed these people with a mere "nod of the head" or maybe some "polite meaningless words." You know, like when someone asks you how you're doing, but you know they don't really care about the answer.

Just to make sure we're on the same page as him, Yeats repeats the phrase "polite meaningless words" in line 8 to show that he doesn't care about the majority of his run-ins with these people.

The repetition of the phrase "polite meaningless words" also helps us realize just how much

Yeats finds his interactions with people repetitive (and probably boring). But hey, at least the guy has the good will to "linger awhile" with some of these people.

You know, because he's such a nice dude.

At this point, it's also worthwhile to note that Yeats' diction isn't all that fancy compared to some of the stuff he usually writes.

There's nothing really all that poetic about what he's saying in these opening lines, just like there's nothing poetic about the boring conversations he's talking about.

Lines 9-12

And thought before I had done  
Of a mocking tale or a gibe  
To please a companion  
Around the fire at the club,

While he's talking to these people, Yeats will sometimes think of a funny story or "mocking tale" that he can tell that will make people happy around the fireplace at a nearby club or "bar." You know, if he's feeling really generous, he'll tell people a funny story. But his communication with these people stays totally superficial.

You can kind of tell how superficial his conversations are by how little "poetry" there really is in these lines. Sure, the guy is still writing things in a nice, flowy way. But if you were looking for themes to analyze in this first stanza, Yeats isn't giving you all that much. All you can really say so far is, "Yup, he finds most of his social interactions pretty meaningless."

One thing that does happen in these lines, though, is that Yeats' diction starts to get even folksier than it is in the beginning lines. We're thinking this might be ironic on Yeats' part, as he is starting to use silly sounding words to help show how unimportant these interactions are to him. Who in the world calls a funny story a "mocking tale" or "gibe"? This isn't just language from Yeats' time. It's intentionally silly.

Lines 13-16

Being certain that they and I

But lived where motley is worn:  
All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

Yeats was always certain that the social world where he talked to these people is a world "where motley is worn" (14). Motley refers to the patchwork of colors that would traditionally be worn by a jester or old-timey comedian. By associating a silly life with the kind of "motley" clothes people wear, Yeats is also using a little device called metonymy. Basically, he's playing on our usual associations with clown clothing to make us think of his entire social life as silly and pointless.

This is another image Yeats uses to say that he always assumed these people lived in a world where you went to work, joked around at the bar, and called it a day.

But now, something that has happened that has made "All changed, changed utterly" (15).

Readers of Yeats back in the day would have known at this point that Yeats is now referring back to this poem's title, "Easter, 1916," which refers to a bloody uprising in Ireland's history. This uprising still would have been fresh in people's minds when Yeats published this poem in 1921. So readers here would definitely be waiting for Yeats to get to the part about people dying.

Yeah, now we're getting somewhere as far as poetry goes. Now Yeats isn't all like, "I don't really care about talking to people on the street." Instead, he talks about a "terrible beauty."

Apart from the fact that both of these words are very different in tone from the rest of the first stanza, they also create a lot of conflict right off the bat by being an oxymoron. By definition, beauty is supposed to be a good thing. So what are we to make of a guy who refers to a certain type of beauty as "terrible?" That's a question that only reading the rest of the poem can answer. It's also a little technique called foreshadowing. Stay tuned.

Lines 17-20

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

It's not totally clear which woman Yeats is talking about here. But some quick research tells us that it's probably the Countess Constance Markievicz, who was one of the main people behind the Easter Uprising. She was sentenced to death, but got the sentence reduced to life in prison.

Here, Yeats isn't exactly showering praise on the woman who gave her life to the Irish cause. In fact, he says that much of the goodwill this woman showed was ignorant and uninformed. He also says that this woman liked to argue so much that her "voice grew shrill" (20). These aren't exactly kind remarks for someone who would've been a national hero in Ireland when Yeats was writing this.

By using the phrase, "her voice grew shrill," Yeats is also bringing us back to one of his favorite poetic techniques—metonymy.

When he says that the woman's voice grew shrill in these lines, that's not all he actually means. What he's saying is that this woman's involvement in politics has taken away her feminine beauty, which Yeats symbolizes here through the idea of a once-beautiful voice getting shrill over time because its owner won't stop arguing about politics.

Lines 21-23

What voice more sweet than hers  
When, young and beautiful,  
She rode to harriers?

In these lines, though, Yeats sounds like he's changed his tune. Suddenly, his tone seems nice when he asks what voice was sweeter than the Countess's when she was young and beautiful and "rode to harriers." This last phrase is a British phrase meaning that the woman rode on a horse during a hunt for rabbits. But when you think about it, it's kind of a nice symbol of rich beauty. Can't you just see the Countess riding on her horse through a beautiful green forest, birds chirping on every side of her?

But by using the metonymy of a "shrill voice" to show an ugly change, Yeats seems to be saying that the Countess was once a young and beautiful woman who did beautiful rich-people activities like rabbit hunting. But as she got older, she got involved in the dirty world of politics and her voice got shrill. Yeats here isn't exactly advocating for women to enter politics. It seems that he prefers them young, rich, beautiful, and away from the public sphere. Not the most forward-thinking message, but there you have it.

Lines 24-30

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.

Now Yeats is talking about some guy who kept a school and "rode our winged horse." Yeats is kind of relying on his Irish audience to know his references. But for those of us who were born more than 80 years later, we need to look this dude up to find out that his name was Padraic Pearse.

Like the Countess, this guy was one of the leaders of the Easter Uprising in Ireland. And yes, the dude was the founder of a boys' school in Dublin and he was also a poet. Yeats throws in the mention of the "winged horse" because this mythical beast (or Pegasus) was the official animal of the poet in Greek myth. Now that's some solid symbolism going on there.

Next, Yeats mentions "this other" dude, who was a helped and friend to Pearse. The guy Yeats is referring to is probably Thomas MacDonagh, who was a poet and dramatist who also helped

with the Uprising. Yeats seems to feel a special pique of regret for this guy, since he was "coming into his force" or just starting to get good as a writer when he was executed for fighting in the Uprising.

In this section, you can also see Yeats starting to get a little more obvious with some of the rhymes he's been throwing down in this poem. Earlier, the rhyme might have been hard to detect. But here, he's kind of spelling it out for us with pairs like "horse" and "force" or "friend" and "end." Now this might be because Yeats is actually starting to talk about another poet, or maybe he's starting to feel some emotion in what he's talking about. It's kind of hard to tell—both for us and for Yeats himself, it seems.

According to Yeats, MacDonagh might have even gotten famous if he'd kept his nose out of the fighting, because the guy had a sensitive nature and his thought was "daring and sweet." Remember here that Yeats was already a famous poet by this time, and he had no interest sticking his neck out just so Ireland could be independent from England. He had his career to think about.

Throughout these lines, Yeats keeps saying things like "That woman" or "this man." It sounds like he's actually holding out an old photograph and pointing at each of these people as he describes them. This has the effect of showing us that these people lived only as memories because they're now dead or in prison for life.

Lines 31-35

This other man I had dreamed  
A drunken, vainglorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart,  
Yet I number him in the song;

Whoever this next guy is, Yeats really doesn't sound like a big fan. There's really nowhere else in this poem where he uses a phrase that's as harsh as "drunken vainglorious lout." He says that he'd always thought of this guy as a drunken oaf or hick.

Yeats says he especially didn't like this guy because the dude had done bitter harm to people Yeats cared deeply about.

Okay, we'll tell you—the guy Yeats is talking about here is Major John MacBride, a man who was once married to Maud Gonne, who just so happens to be the woman Yeats spent most of his life obsessing over. Yeats clearly resented this guy for being married and unmarried to Maud. But still Yeats overcomes his sour grapes and says "Yet I number him in this song," meaning that he's willing to give MacBride his due for fighting for the Irish cause.

Line 36-40

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.

As Yeats winds down his second stanza, he says that Major MacBride has "resigned his part" and died like many of the other revolutionary leaders. But the fact that Yeats calls the Uprising a "casual comedy" suggests that he still isn't sold on whether or not the whole thing was worth the trouble. The phrase "casual comedy" also involves some alliteration that makes it sound even more, well, casual. It's almost verging on some of the silliness that Yeats puts in the first stanza of this poem.

Nonetheless, Yeats says that MacBride has "been changed" through his sacrifice. He's no longer just a living jerk. Now he's a dead hero. Yeats closes the stanza with everyone's favorite oxymoron by writing, "A terrible beauty is born," which he'll repeat a couple more times in the poem. In fact, you could just go ahead and call this phrase a refrain, meaning that it works in this poem kind of like the way a chorus works in a pop song.

The fact that Yeats keeps returning to this phrase suggests that it holds some power to unlock the meaning of this whole poem.

And in this context, he seems to be suggesting that even though the bloodshed of the Uprising was terrible, there's something beautiful about the sacrifice that people were willing to make for something they believed in.

Lines 41-44

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.

Now Yeats is starting to put on his serious hat. In these lines, he compares hearts that have only one purpose only to a stone that splashes into or "troubles" the living stream of history.

Oh yeah, and we should mention here that Yeats isn't talking about hearts that have decided to rebel against their owners and jump out of people's chests. He's using a device called synecdoche to use people's hearts as symbols for the entire person.

So what he really means here is, "People who are devoted to a single purpose," kind of like the Irish fighters.

And on top of that, Yeats is comparing these people's "hearts" to a stone, which might sound kind of harsh at first. But he doesn't mean "cold and uncaring" when he talks about a stone here. He means that these people's sense of purpose is unmovable and unchanging. Even though the seasons change like summer and winter, and the stream of life keeps moving and changing, these people's passion won't change even after they're dead.

Yeats' language is different here than earlier in the poem. By comparing the fighters to a rock, he's giving them a sort of respect that he hasn't earlier in the poem. Maybe he's finally starting to throw down some mad props for the dead.

Lines 45-48

The horse that comes from the road.  
The rider, the birds that range  
From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
Minute by minute they change;

In order to show us just how unchanging the fighters' passion was, Yeats decides to throw down a bunch of nature imagery to give us an example of things that actually do change over time.

For example, someone riding along the road on a horse changes; the birds that fly above him change and the clouds keep floating along. "Minute by minute," all of these things change. But not the passion of the fighters who have died. They can't change anymore because they're dead, and they died with thoughts of a free Ireland in their hearts, which makes these passions stay the same forever.

Pretty intense, eh? Yeats is getting farther and farther away from the snobby tone he started this poem off with.

Lines 49-52

A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse plashes within it;

Hooray. More nature imagery. Nice clouds that get reflected in the moving river. Nice horse sliding into the water and splashing around.

But this is all going on in a world where the people Yeats is remembering are dead and gone.

The world continues on without them, it seems. But we should never forget here that these people and their political cause still exists like an unchanging stone at the bottom of the stream. It's a metaphor for how there's something permanent left behind by these people's sacrifice, even though the world might go on changing with the seasons. You might not be able to see their lingering presence; but it's still totally there.

Lines 53-56

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.

Okay, Yeats. We get the point that nature is nice and you're very good at describing it. It's great that the moor-hens love to dive into the water and call out to their boyfriends, the moor-cocks.

Yes, they live minute-by-minute. They don't really think about the past and the future because they're animals. They live totally in the here and now and they just take change as it comes. But not the people who died in the Easter Uprising. No, these folks are like a stone that continues to exist "in the midst of all" the change that's going on.

Here, Yeats almost sounds as if he feels some sort of survivor guilt over what has happened to his friends. It's like he's questioning his own bravery because he totally backed away from all the fighting and wanted no part in it.

He probably wonders here whether there's anything inside of him that's as constant and pure as the devotion that his friends had to their political cause. Maybe Yeats is starting to wonder what his life is for if there's nothing he's willing to die for.

Lines 57-64

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.

Now Yeats is talking about how "too long a sacrifice" can make a stone of the heart. But what exactly does he mean by that?

So far, he's been talking about the unchanging, stone-like quality of the people who fought in the Easter Uprising. But now he seems to be wondering when all of this sacrifice will be enough.

How many people have to die before things can get back to normal? In other words, "when may it suffice?"

Well according to Yeats, "That is Heaven's part," which probably means that it's not up to us to know when there'll be enough bloodshed to stop the fighting and killing. Instead, our role is to "murmur name upon name," which are probably the names of the dead. In other words, we might not be able to put an end to the bloody cycle of history. All we really have the power to do is mourn the people who've died.

Yeats uses simile to compare our mourning to mothers who have to mourn for children who "sleep at last" (i.e. die) after a life of running wild. It can be easy to get lost in some of these lines, because here more than anywhere else in the poem, Yeats is actually starting to layer his images, symbols, and similes one on top of another. So let's just recap here.

Yeats has been talking about people's hearts (i.e. people themselves) being like unchanging stones because they have a goal (Irish freedom) that is unchanging. But now, Yeats is changing the meaning of "stone" and saying that people's hearts (i.e. people themselves) can become stone-like—as in cold and unemotional—if they have to live through too much tragedy or sacrifice.

On top of that, Yeats says that the rest of us (i.e. people who live on) have to spend our lives mourning the people who have died before their time, just like mothers who have to mourn their children.

Phew. Did everyone get all of that?

Lines 65-69

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.

So now Yeats wants to talk about nightfall. But wait a second; no he doesn't. He doesn't want to talk about night, but death. It was a metaphor, you see. Sneaky, that Yeats.

At this point, it honestly sounds like Yeats is getting sick of all the imagery and metaphors he's been layering over the past stanza. So here, he just takes the literal route and says, "Okay, I'm not actually talking about night here. It's a metaphor for death. I'm talking about death. Got it?" Next, he goes back to wondering whether the death that happened in the Easter Uprising as "needless death after all."

Remember that England was still promising to give Ireland its independence once World War I was over. All the Irish had to do was wait another two years and they might have gotten their independence either way—at least, that's how Yeats sees it.

Yeats backs this up by saying that "England may keep faith / For all that is done and said." In other words, he's saying that even though all this violent stuff has gone down, England might still keep its promise and give Ireland its freedom. In this case, the Uprising doesn't look all that glorious.

Lines 70-73

We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?

Despite everything that's happened, one thing's for sure for Yeats: "We know their dream." In other words, we know what these people were willing to die for.

But on the other hand, we also know that "they dreamed and are dead" (71). So that's kind of harsh. It's like Yeats is saying, "Yeah, you guys dreamed of a free Ireland; and now you're all dead. That's all we really know for sure." In these lines, the brute fact of death is threatening to totally take away the value of what the people fought for.

But Yeats doesn't end with this pessimistic, cynical comment. He follows it up by asking whether the people did what they did because they felt too much love. Maybe all of their love for Ireland confused or "Bewildered them" until they died.

Now this may sound a bit nicer, but still not all that complimentary. It's like Yeats is saying these people did what they did out of love. But he's also saying that their love confused them and made them do foolish things that they wouldn't have done if they'd been thinking clearly.

On the other hand, Yeats phrases this bit about the fighters being bewildered by love as a question. It's up to us to decide whether it's a rhetorical question.

Or in other words, is Yeats genuinely curious about whether these people were confused by love, or does he assume that they were?

Lines 74-80

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.

After all his confusion about how he should feel about the Easter Uprising, it looks like the only thing Yeats can say for sure is that he "write[s] it out in verse." But what is "it" in this line? Well "it" seems to refer to Yeats' thought process as he thinks about the Uprising and the people who participated in it.

Now he just writes out the names of people who fought in the struggle (lots of Irish names in there). But he concludes by saying that these people are "changed, changed utterly" both in the present and in the future, especially whenever "green is worn." Yeats is using a metonymy here, as green is the official color of Ireland (go figure).

So Yeats seems to be saying here that these people have been changed by their sacrifice, because now they'll be remembered whenever people wear green and think about Ireland's freedom and its history. This is something Yeats knows he isn't a part of, and he doesn't totally know how to feel about that.

This bit about wearing green is also significant if you remember way back to line 14, where

Yeats uses the metonymy of "motley" clothing to symbolize the silliness of his daily life.

Well now we can contrast that metonymy with the one about wearing green, which Yeats finds much more serious and worthy of poetry. In other words, this contrast between motley and green clothing might actually reveal Yeats' secret belief that these fighters have lived a more meaningful life than he ever will.

The only thing he can really finish by saying is to repeat his favorite refrain, "A terrible beauty is born." The paradox of calling beauty terrible does a good job of bringing together the feelings of admiration and detachment that Yeats feels for the people who fought in the Easter Uprising. He's not prepared to come out and say that it was a glorious event; but at the same time, he's not willing to say that the people died for nothing, either. He's caught between the worlds of total

snobbish removal and a desire to celebrate people who gave their lives for what they believed in.

But yeah, he never really gets any further than uncertainty. That's 20th-century poetry for you.