

The Personal and Political Response in W.B Yeats's "Easter 1916"

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Abstract

One of the troubling issues in "Easter 1916" by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is the use of some ambiguous expressions by the poet in presenting the subject matter of the poem. This ambiguity reflects a duality in the poet's attitude towards the events in 1916. He is not completely consistent with the revolutionaries. In some parts of the poem, the poet is with the Irish rebels whereas in other parts of the poem he is against them. However, the present paper aims at studying the reason behind the poet's dual attitude in the poem. In terms of methodology, the present paper gives a summary of the poem then it moves to some different aspects of poetic reaction and situations such as rational versus emotional, individual prejudice, and conformity. The study found out that the ambivalence in "Easter 1916" is caused by the intervention between the poet's personal and the political visions.

الاستجابة الشخصية والسياسية في قصيدة " ثورة عيد الفصح 1916 " لبييتس

الخلاصة:

أحدى القضايا المثيرة للقلق في " ثورة عيد الفصح 1916 " للشاعر ويليام بتلر بييتس (1865-1939) هي استخدام بعض التعبيرات الغامضة من قبل الشاعر في تقديم موضوع القصيدة. حيث ان الغموض في القصيدة يعكس ازدواجية في تعامل الشاعر مع الموضوع الرئيسي في القصيدة. ففي بعض اجزاء القصيدة فان الشاعر مع الثوار بينما في اجزاء اخرى من القصيدة فان الكلمات المستخدمة من قبل الشاعر تبين على انه ضد الثوار. يهدف البحث الى دراسة الأسباب وراء الازدواجية في موقف الشاعر من الثوار . استخدام التعبيرات والكلمات في هذه القصيدة . اما من حيث المنهجية فيتناول البحث تعريف موجز عن القصيدة ومن ثم يركز البحث على دراسة بعض اوجه ردود الافعال الشعرية والمواقف مثل استخدام اللغة العقلانية ضد العاطفية و لغة التحامل الفردي ولغة الامتثال او الانسجام . توصلت الدراسة الى ان من اكثر العوامل التي تؤثر على استخدام الشاعر بييتس للغة في قصيدة " ثورة عيد الفصح 1916 " التداخل بين الرؤى الشخصية والسياسية للشاعر.

Keywords : *Pacifist, violence, stone, green, personal.*

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I. Introduction

Yeats' "Easter 1916" is read as a political poem in that the poet deals with the British- Irish conflict during the Irish revolution in 1916. A close reading of the poem uncovers a duality in the use of words and phrases. For instance, the poet repeats the paradoxical phrase *A terrible beauty is born* which suggests that the poet is with the rebellion but against the way it has been conducted. He also uses symbols such as *green color* which symbolizes the Irish hot- blood spirit. On the other hand, Yeats calls the rebellion *a casual comedy* and he mentions that he used to pass the rebels with a nod of the head that means that he is not with the rebels. What is not clear is the reasons behind the duality in the choice of words and phrases in the poem. Theoretically, the study is based on reader – response theory since the analysis of the poem, "Easter 1916" is built on reading, reacting and concentrating on details in the text of the poem besides the interpretation of acts and attitudes in the poem. The present study aims to shed light on the ambivalence in the poet's use of language. The study found out that Yeats is conformist in dealing with the Irish issue due to the change in his life, particularly his life in London.

"Easter 1916"

"Easter 1916" from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) is a portrait of a group of people who sacrificed their lives in the Easter Revolution of 1916. The main theme of the poem is the Irish people's sacrifice and commemoration of the 1916 bloody uprising. Yeats identifies some of the people fighting against the law of Britain. He sounds in this poem in a state of in-between, he shows a dual attitude toward the rebels. On the one hand, he portrays how useless and futile the 1916 revolution is and on the other, he expresses an Irish hot blood spirit glorifying the rebels ((Perloff ; 233).

One Sunday, on Easter a group of people led by Patrick Pears waged a courageous but failure rebellion against the British rule that had governed Ireland for three hundred years. The rebels made this uprising against the British rule to achieve the Irish independence. Though the rebels themselves knew that this uprising would fail, they made it. The revolt was followed by a week of clashes known as the Easter revolt. The ringleaders were detained and executed. When the first world war ended, the rebellion was launched for the second time. In 1922 Ireland got its British- recognized sovereignty. One day, in 1916, Yeats wrote a letter to lady Gregory describing his viewpoint concerning the uprising:

I am trying to write a poem on the men executed 'terrible
beauty has born again'. If the English Conservative party
had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind
the home rule these would have been no Rebellion. I had
no idea that any public event could so deeply move me and

I am very despondent about the future(Cullingford;96).

“Easter 1916” or the bloody uprising was written in 1916 between May and September, three months after executing the leaders of the revolt. The execution of the rebels made them martyrs because they tried to achieve the Irish independence. Britain recognized the Irish independence in less than six years. While on writing this poem, Yeats did not know that the rebellion could achieve its goals in several years, for this reason the poem was kept unpublished until 1921.

However, one of the characteristic features of the poem is its complicated clarity. The style is very simple and beautiful, but the simplicity and beauty contradicts the grave concern which is caused by the bloody uprising, for Yeats fears the loss of lives in the revolution. Simply, the title *Easter 1916*, refers to the Irish rebellion on Easter Monday, April 24th, 1916. Some critics such as Harold Bloom, however, proves that the most complicated part in the poem is its title in that it is embodied creatively within the lines of the poem:

As for "Easter 1916," which Harold Bloom once found was, in its clarity, uncharacteristic of Yeats, Vendler finely brings out its complicated clarity, but also points out something about the poem that I, at least, had never noticed: that the date of the Easter rebellion, April 24, 1916, is encoded in the structure of those four stanzas (April is the fourth month), with their alternate line groupings of 16, 24, 16, 24.(Pritchardr;1).

II. Rational versus Emotional

For Yeats, the presence of the modern man consists of antinomies: personal, social, rational and emotional maturity. These disputes are always in the poetry of Yeats((Perloff ; 233). Throughout the poem, Yeats, seems uncertain of the success of the 1916 Irish revolution. He indirectly, evokes the question of sacrifice. He questions the great loss of men in this uprising “O when may it suffice?”. He asks why the rebels sacrificed themselves for events they knew it would lose. However, the first lines in the poem are commentaries on the quiet atmosphere of Dublin before the 1916 bloody uprising. Yeats describes the people who came from work in the evening. He shows how he overtakes those people either with "nod of head /Or polite meaningless words". Yeats uses repeatedly the phrase “meaningless words” to say that his talk with these people is unimportant and to make us perceive that his connection with those people is sketchy and boring.

Yeats is at difference with those national people from the middle class. He considers them, before the uprising, merely common people. He describes their faces as "vivid faces" and this is a typical of the Irish people; he meets them in well-mannered way greeting them with "polite meaningless words". The poet's intention in the initial lines is to give us a positive portrait of Ireland At the time of peace. They are healthy "Vivid faces" like jokes and clowning. Yeats expresses his personal interest in fellow citizens but he dislikes their way of thinking because he was pacifist; does not believe in violence. He had a strong faith that the rebellion is, like its precedents, a futile one that would end with failure and a loss of spirits. He begins his poem by describing the people whom he met at the end of a routine working day "I have met them at close of day", he means at the end of a working day. He repeats the phrase "Polite meaningless words" which suggests that he disagrees with the rebellion:

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, (Collected Poems).

The strong oxymoron "A terrible beauty is born" is a refrain used to show the impact of Easter uprising. It is beautiful because the rebels' goals are noble. Yeats ends the second stanza of this poem by repeating the phrase "A terrible beauty is born." Perhaps, Yeats wants to say that in spite of the bloody uprising, there is something beautiful that the Irish people dream of independence from the British rule. He talks about change, the negative change, "All changed, changed utterly:" He means everything changed completely. The significance of the word "motley" here is that it symbolizes coat worn by clown (Jason):

Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born(Collected Poems).

III. Individual Prejudice

Individual prejudice is a sever and unjustified attitude toward individuals and it is always negative not positive. Yeats believes that "subjectivity is asserted through resisting and opposing the conditional relationship

formed between individuals" (Hong; 274). There is no social basis for Yeats' emphasis on individual values. Yeats would like to say that freedom moralizes people's worst "He, too, has been changed in his turn,/ Transformed utterly". The poet speaks about the headmaster of his school who encouraged the talented students like Yeats and also speaks about his assistant who was also an ambitions. The point here is that the death of such good people is a great loss.

Yeats begins talking about a man who kept a school. This man is Patrick Pears who is one of the leaders of the uprising. He was executed by the British authorities. The poet also mentions Pears' friend Thomas MacDonagh who was a poet. Yeats liked MacDonagh's character because he was a good writer but at the end he was executed by the British authorities. He was famous because he has sensitive nature and high spirit. Although he did not mention his name, Yeats mentions the story of MacBride through the description. He refers to MacBride with the worst of traits. He mentions that even this man has changed by the beauty of freedom. John MacBride was married to Maud Gonne who was Yeats' beloved. Yeats describes John MacBride as unstable man and a lout. Yeats does not like this character because he caused pain for people in Easter 1916:

This man had kept a school
And rode our wingèd 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 (Collected Poems)

Criticizing another individual in the uprising, Yeats sheds light on an unidentified woman in his poem as a leading figure in the uprising. This woman is countess Constance Markiewicz whom he loved in the past. The mentioning of that woman and her support for this uprising was not positive but rather a form of criticism as she said, "In ignorant good-will," He criticizes her involvement in politics as taking her femininity away. This is expressed in this line "Until her voice grew shrill." This is just to say that she lost her feminine voice by involving herself in politics. He seems to compare her life before and after the bloody uprising. Before the uprising, she was a beautiful young lady. But once she got older and got involved in politics, she lost that beauty:

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? (Collected Poems)

IV. Conformity

Conformity means a change in someone's behavior to cope with the established power. Yeats' vision is a conformist one in that he warns that the continuous struggle can lead to the loss of many lives. Yeats conforms to the British government and his readers in London. The Irish life is, in part, trapped in the winning of rights between the current politics and the fighting game. Yeats wants to indicate that the leaders, even with all the positive aspects of the uprising, had to be careful and patient, especially because England promised to give Ireland independence after the war. This has affected his language, using phrases that suggest conformity such as *polite meaningless words*. In addition, Yeats talks in a very esthetic way about the transition that affected him and Ireland after the uprising. He conforms to the styles of poetry of William Blake(1757-1827) and P.B. Shelley(1792-1822)(Regan:87). Through words like day and gray, he uses sound devices such as rhythm when shifting between life and death and rhyme. Such devices give the poem an aesthetic touch that the readers sense. In terms of imagery, the poet uses natural images skillfully: such as *the flying bird, the person who rides the horse, and the floating clouds*. Such beautiful pictures show us Ireland's lovely and beautiful nature. It can be said that this is the best example of the aesthetic aspect of "Easter 1916". The repetition of the phrase "A terrible beauty is born" is another artistic feature of this poem. Yeats wants to say that despite the killing, executions, suffering and pain that was caused by the bloody uprising, there is something promising which is the Irish freedom. Furthermore, Yeats utilizes multiple iambic tetrameter and trimeter rhyming patterns to highlight the purpose and the importance of certain components in the poem. He primarily utilizes iambic tetrameter patterns that powerfully express the meaning of pointlessness of the Irish compliance with the British rule and the recent shift in Ireland. Yeats' knowledge of creative expression conveys the meaning of his speech by keeping consistency in a b a b form, retaining the feeling of unity at the same time, allowing it to move away from its structure and thus reflecting on the notion of a modern age in Ireland, as well as the most awaited change and recognition. ((Perloff ; 234).

The poet attacks the use of violence in achieving political goals. He criticizes the abruptness of the decision of going to war. He sheds lights on the negative sides of the rebel to criticize the aim of the uprising in achieving the best for the Irish people. He is especially opposed to the rebellion "Too long a sacrifice, Can make a stone of the heart." and "Was it needless death after all?" He warns the rebels of the long effect of using violence, for making people stone-hearted. He also refers to the people who led the uprising explaining that he knows them and his reaction to them was just to say meaningless words just like meeting anybody.

Yeats believes that the function of poetry is to shape people by agitating their feelings and mentality. He sees that the poem is a song of harmony between the poet and his fellow citizens (Pietzak:7). In his references, to the Irish people, Yeats compares their heart with a stone. He means that they are kind-hearted but violence hardened their hearts and this is a negative change. He mentions that the seasons like summer and winter are changing but the rebels' emotions do not change even after death:

Hearts with one purpose alone

Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream (Collected Poem)

Yeats describes a natural scene as he shows us things such as birds, the person riding the horse and the cloud that change over time. These things change minutes by minute:

And what if excess of love
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 (Collected Poems)

The third stanza is the most important because the immovable stone is remembered by Yeats. The stones are in the mind “A terrible beauty is born.” At the end of the first two stanzas and the last stanza this makes this stanza stronger. The stone stands for hard-heartedness, violence and magic. Those people died but by making this uprising and their political cause made them great people because they changed the history of Ireland by their attempt to free the Irish people from the British rule. Then Yeats mentions the leaders of the Easter uprising whom he knew (Perloff ; 227). They are MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly and Pearse. They were the leading figures of this uprising. Yeats uses green color which is a symbol of the national color of Irish people. They are remembered whenever people wear this color:

Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (Collected Poems)

Yeats, then starts talking about the stone that he describes as unchanging like the people who fought in the bloody uprising. This makes people wonder would the sacrifice of the people be enough and how many people must die before this pain ends. “To murmur name upon name,” means the names of the dead, the people who spend their lives mourning their loved ones like mothers who mourn their children. Violence changes people and sacrifice is something divine like that of Jesus Christ. As common people we should lead a normal life:

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, (Collected Poems)

The poet uses metaphor when he talks about nightfall. Nightfall does not actually mean night but rather death. He speaks about the revolutionaries who were common people but became "wild" and therefore died violently :

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; (Collected Poems)

Yeats begins wondering if the death that resulted from Easter uprising is "needless death after all." Then he talks about England. He says, "For England may keep faith." He says that after all the violence, pain, and suffering England still promises the Irish people that it will give them their independence. The Irish dreamed of their independence, but now they are all dead. He means that they should have waited for England may keep its word (Mitra) :

For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead; (Collected Poems)

Yeats conforms to British authorities due to his feeling of the futility of the uprising and the loss of many lives. In addition to this he is very keen to his posit and fame as a poet in the British society. He spent most of his life in London and he considers himself one of the middle class people. He conforms to the Irish rebels because his evaluations of the uprising depended on certain situations. For instance, when he met the rebels at the end of a working day. He knows most of them. He seems very smooth in his description by stating his relationship with the leaders of the rebellion and ending it with the beauty that was born through the revolution. "I write it out in a verse—, MacDonagh and MacBride, And Connolly and Pearse" These lines represent the moral side. By mentioning the names of the leaders, Yeats wants to immortalize those who were killed and makes the Irish people remember them.

He also wants to make them heroes because they were the leaders of this uprising. Through this uprising Ireland has become united and got its independence. In addition to that, Yeats also wants to fulfill his moral duty to pay tribute to those heroes.

Finally, the ambivalence in the poet's attitude is triggered by the conflict between the personal and political expectations of the poet. Yeats loves his fellow citizens but he dislikes their way of thinking. He is pacifist; does not believe in violence. He sees that violence changes people and sacrifice is something divine like that of Jesus Christ and the revolutionaries were common people but became wild and therefore died violently. The interest in folklore, physical appearances, green color shows his love for his fellow citizens. He addresses the rebels in a well-mannered way, embracing them with "polite meaningless words". He wants to give us a positive portrait of Ireland at the time of peace. He is not completely against the revolution but he is against the way it has been conducted which caused trauma, suffering and killing. He calls the rebellion *a casual comedy*, he means that the rebellion is like its precedents as he is familiar with the rebellion's participants. He repeats the beautiful phrase *A terrible beauty is born*. He uses this oxymoron to demonstrate that the rebels are kind-hearted and their goal is noble, but he fears the consequences of the clash with an established power. To him, the Irish issue is political rather than national. He was confident of the defeat of the uprising when he wrote the poem. He did not know that the revolution was going to achieve its goals in 1922.

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