

William Butler Yeats' Political Views of Rising in *Easter 1916*

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Received: 30/12/2019

Accepted: 12/5/2020

Published: 2020

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Abstract:

It has been 103 years since the Rising of Easter 1916 had broken in Ireland. Yet, there are still far reaching questions regarding the real political views of William Butler Yeats in his famous poem *Eater 1916*. William Butler (1865-1939) is one of the poets who wrote about the events in their country in general and about the Rising of Easter1916 in particular. Butler as an Irish poet is expected to believe and support this rising, but as a protestant who spent most of his youth in London, should refuse and denounce The Easter Rising 1916. Yeats belongs to the protestant who was controlling the political, social, and economic life of Ireland. For this reason, many people suspected his loyalty and accused him of lacking the sense of Irish nationalism and patriotism. However, Yeats attacked his Irish contemporaries who under evaluates his nationalism, saying that every man born in Ireland should belong to it, and if a man considers himself an Irishman then he is indeed a part of Ireland. This research states how Yeats was insisting on his

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Irish nationality in spite of the fact that he had spent most of his life living out of Ireland and he belongs to the Anglo section through analyzing important and relevant lines from his historical and patriotic poem, *Easter 1916*. Additionally, some relevant messages between the poet and his friends will be stated to support his views. It is concluded that W.B. Yeats positively expresses his Irish nationality and support of independence through his poem *Easter 1916*

Key words: Political, Yeats, Irish, independence.

Section One

Introduction:

Many critics accused the poet William Butler Yeats of lack of loyalty to Ireland, being descended of Anglo – Irish stock. He also accused of belonging to a colonial class, which represents the English occupation. However, Yeats faced this claim through his historical and political poem *Easter 1916*. The poem clearly showed Yeats' nationalistic spirit and his glorification to the leaders of the Rising Easter 1916. The findings of the research can be used to plant the spirit of nationalism and patriotism in society and students in particular to teach students to keep the country in their mind and heart. The research provides students with information about the

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history of Ireland and the stages passed to get independence. Furthermore, the students can identify some literary symbols and images to express themselves through writing a text or a poem. The social messages that Yeats introduced in this poem can be used to prevent such brutal suppression for individuals.

Section Two

Ireland before the Easter Rising 1916

Before the study goes into details about Yeats' true sentiments, brief background regarding of Ireland would be given. The island of Ireland was part of Great Britain and under the control of the United Kingdom since 1800. As a result of losing its parliament in Dublin, it was ruled by a united parliament in London. The Members of the Parliament who were chosen in Ireland were going to the House of Commons in London and thus Ireland was governed by this parliament through its Dublin Castle administration. In 1858, groups of secret Irish nationalists financed by Irish and American sympathizers start to oppose this arrangement in different ways. It named itself Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).¹ Ireland witnessed many attempts to free itself from the control of Britain, since the act of Union 1800; which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The first attempt was made by Robert Emmet (a protestant Republican) after three years of the

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_Republican_Brotherhood¹

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declaration of the Union. The second one was in 1848, which was led by Young Ireland Intellectuals from both Catholic and Protestant, who had the same idealism and nationalism thoughts. In 1867, another attempt took place by the Organization of Fenian ([Irish Republican Brotherhood](#)). It is remarkable to say that these revolutions were accompanied by demands of constitutional nationalism, which was initiated by Daniel O'Connell, a Catholic who obtained for the Irish Catholic, the right to sit in the United Kingdom Parliament. Afterwards, Charles Parnell, a Protestant from the Parlemanray, who struggled for Home Rule, could have limited –self government for Ireland, which sought the return to a separate Irish Parliament (Veldeman, 2007, p. 151). In the midst of the decline of the industries and agriculture fields in Ireland and under unjust laws that were imposed on Irish, many young men took "*the king's shilling and became humble servants of Her or His Britannic Majesty*" (P. Jones, P.36). This means that the Irish had to be treated indecently and had to accept inferior jobs in England, while the respectable jobs would be only limited to the British citizens. Moreover, "*The Irish taxes would be collected by officials of the British Government, and the cash paid by them into the British Exchequer*". (P. Jones, P 55) This indicates that the taxes which came from the Irish people would be devoted to

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the British Government. Finally, a series of crises and delays from the British Government smashed the hopes for a peaceful resolution for the Irish demands and led to the Easter Rising 1916. (Veldeman, 2007, p. 152) During this time, Ireland was under varied political and social pressures. The revolutionaries were divided into those who support the traditional and long negotiation; and those who find violence to be the only solution to have independence. Yeats condemned the revolutionaries who adopted the style of violence and of the English Parliament and he considered them as a group of murders. Richard Ellman, Yeats' biographer, states that Yeats had been drawn to nationalism, from his youth, but at times he was highly critical of some of the revolutionary activists. Although, he made friendships with ardent nationalists, he was uncertain about the best way to have independence. He condemned O'Connell who was able to earn supporters among the Irish masses and h Catholic Association. He also believed" that revolutionary upheaval is a necessary precondition for the structural changes necessary to transform a capitalist system to a qualitatively different socialist economic system "¹.Yeats did not accept O'Connell's policy and accused him of being the chief reason of the political division in Ireland. He also criticized his moral grounds, saying that his personal influence had been entirely evil. Vice

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformism>

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versa, Yeats esteemed Thomas Davice and O' Leary¹, the antithesis of O'Connell who was tolerant, self-affective, and had a passion for justice .Davice taught Yeats that they were not fighting for part, but for a nation. He sought a nationality, which had nothing to do with religion, race or language. He believed that the best solution to build a strong nationality was not to get it rid of creed or race, but through building a nation which would be common to all. (Cullingfor, 1981, pp.7-9)

The Easter Rising 1916

On Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, a group of Irish nationalists announced the establishment of the Irish Republic, organized with 1,600 followers, made a rebellion against the British Government in Ireland. Within a week, British troops suppressed the rebellion and more than 2,000 people were killed and injured. The sixteen leaders of the rebellion were executed. (Jeffares, p.116, 1984) At time, the public did not rise to support them. The British government announced martial law in Ireland. Soon, the rebels were crushed by the government troops who sent against them. They also destroyed much of the Dublin city center. 3,000 people were arrested, and some 1,800 were sent to England and

Both of them were lieutenants of the ageing O'Connell, then they became the leaders of the original Young Ireland Group ¹

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imprisoned there without even a judgement. Many Irish people resented the rebels for the destruction and death caused by the uprising. With a much greater number of civilian victims after the repressive policy of Britian , the non - supporters of the rising turned over Britian.(English, 2006, pp264-67) Yeats was not in Ireland at that time, therefor, he was not involved in the rising. As any other Irishman, he was deeply depressed by the dramatic turn of events. "Yeats' reactions to the event were complex: he was deeply moved by the resurgence of a romantic nationalism, which he considered moribund, but on the human level he mourned the waste of life and promise". (Cullingford, 1981, 85) After destroying ththe center of Dublinby the British . Yeats was astonished by the horrible events. Ten days after the Rising , he wrote to his friend St.John says:" I have been a good deal shaken by Dublin events- a world one has worked with or against for years suddenly overwhelmed.As yet one knows nothing of the future except that it must be very unlike the past."(Foster, 2003, 46) Malcolm Brown in his book," *The politics of Irish literature*", stated that Yeats was accused of lacking the sense of Irish nationalism. Brown also said that though Yeats was tacking Irish themes in his works and advocating the national revival, his loyalty to Irish has been suspected by the

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revolutionaries whom he did not like (Brown , 1972, 315). Detesting the policy of violence, Yeats attacked his Irish contemporaries who degraded his nationalism. He argued that "all literature created out of a conscious political aim in the long creats weakness by creating a habit of unthinking obedience and a habit of distrust of spontaneous impulse. It makes a slave nation in the name of liberty.(Cullingfor,1981, P.13) A few days after the rising , Yeats was writing to his friends about the rising, one of them was Lady Gregory¹, who encouraged Yeats' nationalism and asked him to come back to Ireland. On 23of May, Yeats expressed his sorrow at seeing many of his friends as prisoners. He wrote:"*If the English conservative party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home Rule Bill, there 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. At this moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature & criticism from politics*". (Foster, 2003, p.51) In another letter to a friend whose name is Quinn, a supporter of the Irish nationalist causes, Yeats told him that he is planning to

¹ Born to a close family with British rule, she turned against them. Her conversion to cultural nationalism, as evidenced by her writings, was characteristic of many of the political struggles to occur in Ireland during her lifetime.

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write a group of poems on the Dublin Rising, but he is delaying this until his return to Ireland. (*Foster, 2003, p.53*). In such circumstances, Yeats wrote his historical and nationalistic poem *Easter 1916* to express feelings of shock, realistic judgment, and to defend his political views about the events.

Section Three

Analyzing *Easter 1916*

As most of the Irish, Yeats expresses his uncertainty about the inevitable causing of this Rising and whether it deserves this sacrifice. Therefore, he enables the reader to follow sympathetically the changes of his belief in which it moves from critical hesitate to compassionate ones. He says: "*I have met them at close of day / from counter or desk among grey*". (L.1-3, 2002, p .221) The poet uses the first pronoun perspective to express his attitudes about the event of the uprising. The first reading of the first line makes us feel that the poet is astonished by the size of the situation. When he uses the present perfect tense, he uses his imagination and tells us that it is not a long time since he met them at the end of the day, probably on the night before the rising. Actually, this is not true, as it is mentioned previously; the poet was out of Ireland. Each one of these friends has its own work like a teacher, a headmaster of a school or a banker. They are living their ordinary in"

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Eighteenth-century houses"(L. 4), they do not know and might, not care if they are going to die the next day, or they are going to peruse their dream of independence. The poet describes the streets of Dublin using the grey word or color to refer to a conservative, timeless, moody and dirty atmosphere of the city in the poet's mind. During this time Dublin was suffering from poverty, the bleakness and different kinds of depressions. In his Book *The History of Sinn Fein Movement and The Irish rebellion Of 1916 P*, Jones describes Ireland as a place which had become the most miserable country. Dublin had the worst conditions of any city in the United Kingdom. Its wide slums were not limited to back- streets or to impoverished districts. The writer adds that "

The poverty of Ireland has become almost a byword among the nations. People have become almost accustomed to thinking of Ireland as a land of hovels, where half-civilized men, woman, and children roam barefooted through a wilderness of bog and mire."(1917, p. 27) People were suffering from need and poverty; even they were not able to buy shoes beside the spread of different kinds of illness. Then, visualizing, the poet goes to describe those Irish people whom he has just met. He says that he has moved his head towards them as a kind of salutation or he might have welcomed them.

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*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. (L 5-11, 2002, p .221)*

The poet used (or) as a function word indicates alternative and equivalent meanings. It is not important the way of his reaction when he saw those people, what matter is the fact that they were friends and he used to see them and give a polite word or sign of respect. The poet continues in describing their relationships, saying that they were sitting "*Around the fire at the club*"(L. 12), and they were telling jokes. In the light of these lines, it is clear that Yeats wants to tell the readers that he wished to make a friendship with those leaders." *Being certain that they and I*" (L. 13)"in the last lines of the first stanza, the poet confirms this relation. Cullingford confirms this in her book, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, saying that Yeats was grief - stricken by the awful death of the Irish rebellion, however, he was proud of the heroism role they made in this rising. (Cullingford, 1981, p. 96). The poet continues to imagine or to fancy that he and those leaders had lived in one country, despite they "*lived where motley is worn*:"(L. 14, 2002,

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p .221) Therefore, they belong to different sects or different Parties. Allegorically, he uses the word "motely" to refer to the diversity among the Irish. By using this metaphor, the poet implies that there are no differences among them because something would have changed the situation. The poet uses the technique of metaphor, when he compares the birth of the beauty to show the birth of these united people. Symbolically, he portrays this beauty as something terrible, for this birth would cost an expensive price. In the second stanza the poet starts to give information about his friends, the leaders of the Rising, he commences his description by talking about Constance Markiewocz, *That woman's days were spent In ignorant goodwill,*(L.18,2002,p.221) who was an officer in the Irish Republican Brotherhood. She was Yeast's friend since they were young. Figuratively, the poet compares her involvement in the Rising to a brave woman on the horse "*She rode to harriers?*" (L.23, 2002, P. 221), to give the impression that this woman is tough, full of energy, and she has prepared herself for such adventure.

This man had kept a school

And rode our wingèd horse;

This other his helper and friend (L. 24-6, 2002, P. 222)

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Then he mentions Patrick Pearse, a teacher who becomes the temporary president of the Republic, who has read the proclamation declaring Ireland an independent republic. In this poem Yeats uses his poetic talent to prove his views, he uses many poetic devices, such as symbolism, repetition, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, rhyme and metaphors to create clear visual images that would emphasize the meaning of a poem. For example, in producing the image of Pearse riding a winged horse, the poet symbolically refers to Pegasus, the [mythical](#) winged divine [stallion](#) who is one of the most recognized creatures in [Greek mythology](#) that seeks freedom and strength¹. Another patriotic leader, the poet mentions heroically, is Thomas Mcd Donagh, an English professor at University College, Dublin. Besides, there is " *A drunken, vainglorious lout*". (L.32, 2002, p.222). John MacBride, who was not Yeats' friend. Yeats was jealous of MacBride for marrying Maud Gonne ,the woman whom Yeast was in love with. The poet had heard negative reports of MacBride's treatment of Gonne in their marriage from Gonne herself². In spite of Yeats distaste to this man, the poet mentions and immortalizes him in his song. Before the poet concludes the stanza, he celebrates the transformation of these leaders under the spell of violence and

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pegasus>
² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_MacBride

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how they did resign their parts in the casual comedy of ordinary life. (Cowell, 1994, p.106). Emphasizing his point of view, the poet uses the famous refrain line "*A terrible beauty is born*" (L.40) . This line has been repeated three times and it becomes the refrain of the poem. The first repetition expresses the initial remoteness between Yeats and the rising. The second one shows a dramatic change of the poets' thought which states the fact that even though the rebellion was suppressed, the unnecessary loss of life has only the increased Irish people's quest for freedom. The poet describes their condition saying that, they had united their "*Hearts with one purpose alone*" (L.41). This line summarizes the whole poem, for the actual purpose of the poem is to clarify W.B Yeats' political views to the Easter Rising and to immortalize the name of the Rising, "To murmur name upon name,". (L.61) To keep these names in the mind of humanity in general, and in Ireland's history in particular". As a mother names her child "(L.62) After naming these figures as the mother does, the poet questions the significant sacrifice of these individuals, metaphorically, hearts as he named them " Was it needless death after all?" (L. 67). Moving to the sixth stanza, Yeats maintains that the sacrifice made by those heroes would only be needless if the change obtained by this sacrifice was lost and forgotten. Therefore, the poet is determined to"

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write it out in verse" (L. 74) the names of these heroes. Moreover, he confirms the importance of their martyrdom in that " Wherever green is worn, /are changed, changed utterly: "(L78-80, 2002, p.222). Through their ability to make change in Ireland, the leaders of Easter 1916 commenced Ireland's coming of age (Smith, 1990, p. 125). By writing this poem, Yeats politically announced to the world his complete respect towards the leaders and the principles of Easter Rising 1916, which confirms his nationality and desire to see Ireland as an independent country.

Conclusion:

The Irish public was horrified by the rebels surrender in the morning of the Easter. The British Government controlled the prisoners and executed them brutality. It is ironical that although the Irish did not approve the rebellion while it was going on, they began to support the rebellion and to sympathy with the martyrs after the suppression Britain practice on the Irish. Many civilians were killed and had been put in prison for no reasons. Being an Irishman, Yeats supported the Irish independence, though he dislikes the violence. In spite of the fact that Yeats had never been in the middle of the fight, but when he wrote this poem, he always had Ireland in his mind. The need for unity and freedom became Ireland's most important demand, and a

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poet who had chosen to devote his life to his country could not have neglected this question. Though he considered poetry and politics should not interfere, as a strong supporter of nationalism, he could not have just remained indifferent to the oppression the Irish society was facing. The passions, eagerness to Ireland were in Yeats' heart as it is clearly noticed in this poem. The nationalists led the rising and sacrificed themselves, but it is Yeats, who made it an eternal song on the tongue of every Irishman. Led by national spirit, Yeats writes this poem to keep the sacrifice of those Irish symbols immortal forever.

Suggeston:

The researcher suggests that planting the spirit of patriotism can be carried out through studying literature, especially poetry. Poems that describe the struggle of nations to have independence should be available in the curriculum of teaching the English language curriculum.

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مستخلص البحث:

لقد مضى اكثر من مائة سنة على ثورة عيد الفصح في ايرلندا 1916و ومازال الجدل قائما حول الموقف السياسي للشاعر "وليم بتلر بيتس" ازاء هذة الثورة. وليم بتلر هو احد الشعراء الايرلنديين الذين كتبوا عن احداث ايرلندا بصورة عامة وعن ثورة عيد الفصح بصورة خاصة كون بيتس شاعرا ايرلنديا ولد في ايرلندا يتوقع منه ان يساند ويدعم هذة الثورة ولكن كرجل ينتمي الى طائفة البروستانت التي كانت تسيطر على الاوضاع الاقتصادية والسياسية في . بالاضافة الى كونه قد امضى معظم شبابه في لندن يجب ان يرفض ويشجب هذة الثورة. لهذه الاسباب وعلى الرغم من تناولة للعديد من المواضيع القومية الا ان العديد من الناقدين كانوا يشككون في وطنيه. ستبين هذة الدراسة كيف دافع الشاعر عن وطنيته معتبرا ان كل انسان ولد في ايرلندا يجب ان ينتمي لها بغض النظر عن الطائفة او الحزب الذي ينتمي له . سيظهر الباحث ان الشاعر بيتس كان مصرا على قوميتة الايرلندية من خلال تحليل ابيات مهمة وذات صلة من قصيدته التاريخية عيد الفصح 1916. بالاضافة التطرق لبعض الرسائل بين الشاعر واصدقائه التي يذكر فيها استهجانه لسياسة بريطانيا في قمع الثورة. يستنتج الباحث ان الشاعر بيتس عبر عن انتمائة وقوميتة وفي مساندته للحصول على الاستقلال .