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### **Nationalism without Blood Sacrifice**

William Butler Yeats, an Anglo-Irish poet and playwright, composed works with themes of Irish folklore, mythology, nature, and nationalism. During his active writing years in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, nationalism swept through Europe, including Ireland. What is distinct about Yeats' writings and opinions on nationalism is they lacked the notion of a blood sacrifice, the idea that dying for the cause of an idealized nation is necessary and romantic. In his poem, "Easter, 1916", Yeats criticized this ideal of nationalism and those who participated in the violent Easter Rising. Through this poem, Yeats' criticism of this violent event is apparent but so is his acquiescence that the rising brought about support for the cause. Yeats believes the idea of Ireland as a nation now shall be associated with the men of Easter 1916 and not the cultural, non-violent nationalism he believes will allow Ireland to achieve self-actualization.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a stark rise in nationalism across Europe. In Ireland it manifested as the rise of a particularly militant nationalism within the Irish population against British rule in Ireland. Within Ireland, "by 1913, even moderate nationalists were convinced they should form a paramilitary organization to reinforce their demands for self-government and exert additional pressure on the British government" (BBC). This view would become more widespread, but the belief that violent methods to achieve a nationalistic cause were acceptable and necessary was not shared by Yeats.

W. B. Yeats believed in cultural Irish nationalism. He believed use of Irish folklore in his poems would be part of nation building around Irish identity, that artists and creatives in society would produce work to build up this national image and bring society to this idealization. The

values of this society shining through creative works. John Hutchinson and David Aberbach explain artists, “express the nation’s distinctiveness” and they are, “symbols and icons of the nation’s unique and creative powers” (Hutchinson and Aberbach, 1). Through art, the nation gets its symbols, power, morals, and history. Yeats strove to create an image of Ireland distinct from English culture. In an exhibit of his work in The National Library of Ireland, a placard states that Yeats, “epitomized the mood of the ‘Celtic Twilight’ and its blend of myth and symbolism with vague yearning” (Yeats, *Yeats: The Life and Works of William Butler Yeats*). In constructing his vision of Irish identity, Yeats invoked Irish myths and symbolism. He believed in the countryside image, rejecting the city, supporting a time before industrialization. He connected his work to nature and the mystic. Furthermore, violence was not within Yeats’ image of Irish nationalism.

Viewing Yeats at his time and place in Irish history, it is curious violence and rebellion are excluded from his views of nationalism. He did not romanticize blood sacrifice. His work centered around “pre-conquest Gaelic culture” and romanticized agrarian life critical of industrial society, which he associated with Britain (Hutchinson and Aberbach, 2). The tide of nationalism became increasingly more linked to violence leading up to the Easter Rising. This rebellion of Irish nationalist rebels against British control in 1916 sparked an eventual war of independence. In his poem, “Easter, 1916”, Yeats criticized this form of nationalism, lamenting on this as a blow to cultural nationalism.

The first stanza starts before the rising and Yeats inserts himself into moments where he interacts with yet nameless people. It begins, “I have met them at the close of day / Coming with vivid faces / From counter or desk among grey / Eighteenth- century houses” (Yeats, 1-4). Yeats connects himself to who he describes as the main instigators of the Rising. They are ordinary men you could easily pass on the street, who work a boring “grey” desk job. However, their faces are “vivid” in contrast to their jobs and normalcy, as their goals and visions are. With these

men, Yeats says he has shared, “polite meaningless words” (8). Through the beginning and end of the stanza, the men are painted as relatively normal, but Yeats swiftly changes tone with the ending line he repeats throughout. Yeats writes that, “All changed / changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born” (15-16). Yeats feels change in society with the actions of the revolutionaries. Their act produced a “terrible beauty”, a violent nationalism. This is his contention, it became a symbol of Irish unity beginning a push for more military action, but cultural nationalism cannot flourish alongside violent nationalism. Ireland is now associated with weaponry and blood sacrifice of rebels, not folklore and mystical Gaelic culture Yeats supported. The revolution produced violent symbols and gave cultural control to those who held guns instead of pens.

The second stanza of the poem continues to reference men and women involved in the uprising. Yeats need not name them as their execution solidified their place as national martyrs. From the beginning, Yeats’ criticizes and dismisses the leaders of the rebellion. Yeats writes:

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? (17-23)

The woman is described as once having a sweet voice, but her voice turned shrill. Here, Yeats invokes a physical character of beauty, a pretty voice, yet her cause turned it ugly. There is contempt, however, Yeats also characterizes her involvement as “ignorant good-will”. Yeats

acknowledges her intentions as good and that she is unable to see the harm she is doing or pointlessness of it. Use of “good-will” links Yeats to people in the Rising. Their goals are similar but execution of those goals, the ideology, is vastly different. Through this good-will attempt at Irish unity, the rebels are ignorant of the “terrible beauty” they created. He also describes a man involved as taking part in, what he considers the Rising, a “casual comedy” (Yeats, 37). It is a dismissal of their act, downplaying it as non-serious, then a few lines later describing their actions as creating “terrible beauty”. This opposing imagery makes the last line hold a stronger punch. Yeats minimizes their actions as foolish, yet they have wrought great consequences for Ireland. These men will never see or know of their own ignorance.

The third stanza focuses on natural imagery and use of the words “stone” and “heart”. Yeats writes, “Hearts with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone” (Yeats, 41-43). The hearts of men and women involved are steadfast. They will weather difficult moments and changing of times, characterized by the shifting seasons. A stone withstands, and their hearts, like stone, have solidified on their beliefs and thoughts of achieving them. Yeats further writes that, “Minute by minute they live: The stone’s in the midst of all” (55-56). The previous stanza showed his skepticism and dismissal of their beliefs, but in this stanza Yeats shows, despite a difference of views, he admires them. They know their values and fought for them. Yeats acknowledges that is noble, though their actions do not match his own views.

Finally, in the last stanza, Yeats names the rebels and further prompts his own doubt about their actions. He begins with, “Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart” (Yeats, 57-58). Here the image of a stone heart is negative, inflexible, and stuck in one line of thought. The effort of sacrifice can turn the cause down an inflexible and bitter path for the country. Those he criticized and admired in the stanzas before are now characterized by their deaths. Yeats asks in the poem, “Was it needless death afterall?” (67). Was the blood sacrifice worth it?

Was anything achieved other than death and pain from those deaths? Yeats answers his question with:

For England may keep faith  
 For all that is done and said.  
 We know their dream; enough  
 To know they dreamed and are dead; (68-71)

In the end, Yeats writes, England, which keeps Ireland from its true greatness, has won. England and those carrying out English rule are comfortable this rebellion has failed; their dream has died with them. In the end they did not achieve Irish independence, all that exists is their death. Yeats does not believe the English view that their goals are done. He ends the poem powerfully, acknowledging the men, their sacrifice, and change they did bring, even if their means go against his own idealization. Yeats writes:

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. (75-80)

Yeats writes the men's names out, in honor to their memory and sacrifice. From the moment of the Rising and "in time to be" these men will forever be associated with Irish nationalism and

their view will be predominant. Ireland has transformed as result of these men, whose actions and names are forever tied to this “terrible beauty” of Irish culture and identity. MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly, and Pearse will be remembered, “whenever green is worn”. The fight to control the narrative of Irish nationalism rests with the men who made a blood sacrifice.

“Easter 1916” by William Butler Yeats describes the profound effect the Easter Rising had on Irish nationalism. Yeats believed in Irish nationalism shaped by the non-violent, natural world, old Irish myths and folklore, and other ideas not associated with violence or blood sacrifices. In “Easter 1916”, Yeats wrestles with the death of his goal of cultural nationalism, of rallying behind the arts to unite Irish identity. The poem contains contradictions where he criticizes and minimizes those who participated while also admiring the power of their convictions. It is overall a lament; the course Ireland is on has forever changed by this moment and cultural nationalism is dead. The power to determine identity and culture now rests with the revolutionaries who fought in Easter 1916.

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