Easter 1916

2019-04-26

On Easter Sunday of 1916, Irish nationalists launched a spirited but unsuccessful revolt against the British government, which had ruled Ireland with an iron fist for three centuries.  
The week of street fighting that followed is known as the Easter Rebellion. The leaders of the rebellion were captured and executed. After the First World War, fighting broke out again, and in 1922 Britain recognized Ireland’s Dominion status.

## Stanza One

In the first stanza, Yeats is describing Dublin (which was pretty easy for him as he lived in there). He then goes on to speak about how he remembers talking to the rebels on the street or in the club. He mentions his belitting of the rebels to his friends, And thought before I had done of a mocking tale or a gibe to please a companion. Towards the end of the stanza, Yeats intoduces to us a simple, subtle, yet powerful metaphor of *motley*. **Motley meaning a mash-up of different colors**, it also is used to describe people at times.  
The people of Dublin could be said to be a *motley* group in 1916: they were Catholic and Protestant, Irish in spirit but English in terms of citizenship, poor and rich. The River Liffey divides Dublin; many of the rebels worked on the poorer north side of the city. The stanza ends with the line a terrible beauty is born. This line is going to end every stanza.

## Stanza Two

In the second stanza, Yeats begins to actually name the social roles of the rebels. He’s remembering that Constance Markievicz used to hunt and was a sweetie, also remembering that he helped Thomas MacDonagh with his poetry. This sort of *casual comedy* might be referring to the idea of Dublin being a stage, referencing Shakespeare’s ***As You Like It***,   all the world’s a stage; and all the men and women merely players.

## Stanza Three

This stanza introduces an extended metaphor. The rebels having hardened their hearts against the English to focus on a ‘single purpose’ - armed rebellion. Spending the year, through summer and winter, they plotted against the English government. Usually, nature is shown to be unchanging, timeless, and immortal. Yeats reverses the traditional imagery to critique the hardened hearts of the rebels, enchanted to a stone.

## Stanza Four

In the final stanza, Yeats is asking if all the death was worth it, Was it needless death after all? Did the rebels feel so much love for Ireland that they were all willing to sacrifice their lives.

What good is Ireland if the dreamers are dead?

The immediate political issue that arises is that England was on the verge of granting Ireland status as an independent or ‘free’ state, which would allow it to have its own parliament.   The granting of independence had been set aside during World War I because the English required Irish support of the war.

     At the end of the poem, Yeats reconciles himself to the fact that “wherever green is worn,” people will         remember the sacrifices of the rebels of 1916.