



Revolutions in Verse: A New Historicist Interpretation of Yeats's "Easter 1916" and Auden's "Spain"

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Abstract

This study showcases how twentieth century poetry reflects a world shaken and traumatized by two world wars as well as regional civil unrests. During this era, common people fought to claim their rights and hope in the darkness of the political and social sphere. The phrase by Yeats, "A terrible beauty is born" highlights the emotional strength and spirit of the commoners. This turmoil influenced W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden to hold their pens in depicting the chaos of uprising and war in the poems "Easter 1916" where Irish struggle for independence is showed and "Spain" which is representation of the broader ideological battles of the century. Both poets were deeply affected by the global chaos and chose to express their responses through verses. From New Historicist perspective, these poems are cultural works of the twentieth century portraying how ideas and values were shaped and confronted across the world. These two poems have become powerful lenses to understand the cultural and intellectual history of that time. The research was done by following qualitative textual analysis and theory informed close reading has been used to thematically analyze the poems. To get more inclusive data and information for a reliable development of research, books, articles, journals, and other online resources have been used as secondary sources.

Keywords: History, hope, political, struggle, wars

Introduction:

Struggle of today can take the strugglers to a better tomorrow and yesterday can work like the best teacher to show the way of betterment and advancement. Every history is not just a compilation of data and facts rather it becomes a proof past works and deeds which is the torch bearer for the present as well as future with different aspects and ulterior motives. Historically influenced poetry appears to be great source of recollection to make the audience aware of present incidents by drawing parallels to past events and sometimes the poet makes bold political statement or, this poetry might be a testament of the poet's personal account. When historical events resonate with poets' personal encounters, historical poetry can function as powerful and effective medium of emotional expression. (Patterson) W.H. Auden's "Spain" and W.B. Yeats's "Easter 1916" are two politically charged poems referring to two different historical cataclysms- one is the Civil War in Spain and the Easter Rising in Ireland, wrestling with a huge historical change and juncture of violence depicting cultural struggle of common people of two nations approaching towards the light of new hope. As per New Historicist perspectives, the points within these poems

presents that literature is not merely the outcome of a single author's thoughts or a representation of isolated events or data, rather the result of the particular social, political, and historical events that shaped its creation.

Problem Statement:

Yeats's "Easter 1916" and Auden's "Spain" is not merely a poetic recollection of historical events, rather they present an ideological demonstration and tension between personal conscience and mass political actions in early 20th-century Ireland and Europe. The paper explores how both of these poems offer flexible rather than fixed viewpoints where the poems can be seen both products of the 20th century historical context and as documents to internalize the intellectual and societal history of Ireland and Spain. These personal wordings of the poets also helped to shape public opinion regarding war and politics.

Literature Review:

While news media and nonfiction literature document and interpret contemporary incidents and events, poetry showcases a space where poets can express their emotional expressions and personal reflections on events that deeply concern them (Armenti). W. H Auden portrayed a great fascination and regards toward Yeats through his writing in poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats". He did not just make this a praising song rather he expressed his reflections of poet, poetry and war from the point of view of Yeats's life. The voice and influence of Yeats can clearly be found in some of Auden's most iconic works, making Yeats's inspiration both vibrant and impactful. Yeats's poetic interpretation of history and his attempts to analyze historical processes through prose had a great influence on Auden, shaping his efforts to understand and respond to the social and political conflicts of his own time (Graham). Therefore, the impact of historical significance is evident in both of their literary works specially depicting the contemporary struggle and turmoil which was experienced and observed by them in their own life. Much has been talked about Auden's political stance and preoccupation on Marxism and it reached its climax when the Civil War in Spain broke out in 1936. Auden's joining the war as an ambulance driver was the ardent urge of an emotionally charged poet armed with conviction. After his return from the fighting fronts, he wrote the momentous poem "Spain" (1937) and the royalty earned from its sale was contributed for the medical facilities for Spain. Thus, it can be seen how personally and emotionally, Auden was connected to the cause and effect of that civil war. Yeats's "Easter 1916" is widely regarded as one of the most powerful and distinguished poems of twentieth century. This is the revival of Irish revolution which happened on Easter Monday, April 24th, 1916 when Irish rebels began pretesting against the against the tyrannical British rule to get the air of Irish independence. Initially, Yeats's reluctance to support the Easter Rising of 1916 angered Irish nationalists, as he believed that Ireland's idealized historical past, represented by its "seven heroic centuries," rather than the realities of the modern world, provided more appropriate material for artistic expression (Fitzpatrick). However, later Yeats dedicated his poem as an acknowledgement of the Irish common people who became a wall against the British ruling in this Rebellion. Several of the rebels- some of whom Yeats may have known personally- were ultimately executed by firing squad and he evidently included some of their accounts in the poem (Abrams and Greenblatt 2380- 2382). "Auden was particularly important for thinking about the relationship between the extraordinary and the everyday as experienced by historical actors and in the histories written about them" (Steedman). This poem shows a world in chaos and

fury, much like the real world in which Auden was living when he wrote the poem. Although his message about going into the life after the loss of innocence is grave, his language remains easy to interpret for the readers. "Spain", written on the dreadful impact of Spanish civil war, upholds a significant historical importance, but an instance of how effective the poem was in the 1930s can be found in Arnold Kettle's comment "I remember the first time I heard the poem read aloud (by Ian Watt) at a lunch-time meeting in Cambridge which ended with a collection for Spanish medical relief. It was certainly an example of poetry helping to make something happen: but I don't think any of us in the audience thought we were being hectored or got at."

Theoretical Framework:

The theory of literature serves as a tool for analysis, while literature itself is the object to be analyzed. Wellek and Warren emphasize that a thorough understanding of the events among which a literary piece is produced has the ability to greatly illuminate the text, involving the impacts of environmental, social and historical factors of artistic creation (65). New Historicism, as Louis Montrose argues, is connected with the "textuality of history and the historicity of texts" (20), stressing on the reciprocal relationship between literary pieces and historical contexts under which they are produced. The textuality of history means that history is not just a compilation of facts or date, rather it is shaped and constructed like a narrative. On the contrary, historicity of texts suggests that all texts are directly and indirectly- inevitably influenced by social, political or historical contexts in which they are written and read. New Historicism can also be interpreted as an approach that includes parallel reading of a literary and non-literary text produced within the same historical period. Rather than treating the literary text as the primary object of analysis and history as simply its background, this approach offers comparable importance to both of the documents. These texts are read and interpreted in relation to one another, allowing each to question and challenge the other (Barry 172). Traditional historians often define history as a series of events which are directly or causally connected. Furthermore, they observe that objective interpretation of history can reveal the facts that enlighten the "spirit of the age", or the overall perception of a specific culture (Tyson 282). They also read history as an open-ended process through which humanity moves forward and prospers over time (283). On the other hand, new historicists have different opinion regarding this; they believe humans do not have a clear access to basic facts and ideas of history, rather human history is a document of interpretation not a matter of facts. Thus, it can be said there is nothing which is a compilation of facts, there is only interpretation in the matter of history. "For new historicists, history cannot be understood simply as a linear progression of events, because history is not a continuance event which relate with the previous event" (283).

This concept of history can be rightfully demonstrated through Emily Dickinson's "Success is Counted Sweetest," where history becomes "his"- story, a narrative completely shaped by those who are in power. From this notion, the lived history and lineage of the marginalized remain overlooked and ultimately excluded from dominant narratives of history. Dickinson suggests this as a paradox where those who have been denied success have the deepest knowledge of its meaning, "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" (Dickinson 1-2).

Thus, New Historicism offers a valuable understanding for viewing literature within their historical background, especially from the perspective of marginalized individuals or

groups who were denied from the larger narratives. It also states the significance of those denied voices by stressing on their insights onto the past events which were overlooked by the historical narratives. New Historicism was heavily influenced by Marxist criticism, which gave it an active understanding between the oppressed and the oppressor in terms of class relations and power within historical and cultural contexts.

Similarly, New Historicism determines how power structures operate within literature and society. The following points are the concise idea of how New Historicism works

- Literary texts are deeply rooted in the bed of history.
- History is a construction of interpretation, not just a recorded document
- Literature is shaped by cultural and political contexts in which they are produced and read.
- Literary and non- literary texts hold equal importance.
- Power structure and ideology have impacts on all types of writing.
- Marginalized voice is the real form of history kept hidden.
- Literature can be used both as threat to authority or a support system for it.
- Truth is subjective, and there is no single, objective truth
- Authorial intent has less importance than cultural context.
- Finally, history is never the background- rather it is the part of the text.

Stephen Greenblatt, in his essay "Towards a Poetics of Culture," describes New Historicism as a "practice" rather than a "doctrine" (1). He acknowledges that its relationship with literary theory remains complex and unresolved. For Greenblatt, history is not simply a background against which a literary text is understood; rather, it actively shapes the production and meaning of literature. At the same time, literary texts can influence how historical events and cultural realities are understood and represented.

Research Gaps:

Despite the multifaceted sociopolitical and historical studies of Yeats's and Auden's poetic works, there is limited comparative studies on their historical poetry under the lens of New Historicism. Previous researches mostly comprehend the poems focusing on major historical incidents rather than giving attention to how the poems have their way to construct history or challenge the established historical narratives. Thus, this study intends to analyze how Yeats and Auden utilize verses to understand historical incidents by combining history with experience, power, politics, and marginalized perspectives.

Research Questions:

- 1) How was the political and societal unrest prevalent in the underlying structure of 20th century?
- 2) How did Yeats's and Auden's times affect both of the poems and how the poems reflect the poets' capsize times?
- 3) Why the Marxist perspective was relevant in the power structure of that time?

Research Methodology:

This study follows a qualitative and comparative approach to explore selected historical poems of W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden through the framework of New Historicism. It expects to examine and find out the idea of historical alignment with both of the poems Auden's "Spain" and Yeats's "Easter 1916" in relation to politics, power and marginalizes perspectives. Theory informed close reading has been used to thematically analyze the

poems. Relevant historical documents and scholarly sources have been utilized to examine how the poems reflect and shape historical narratives.

Discussion and Findings:

During 20th century the whole world was shocked and broken with the havoc of two world wars. Besides, many nations saw civil wars and experienced various revolts. By the early 1900s many nationalist groups and organizations started to rise in Ireland with the zeal of Irish cultural rival and the goal of getting independence from Britain. When Irish people were heading towards Civil war, the context of First World War helped Ireland for the path of independence. The Easter Rising was an armed rebellion against British tyranny, initiated by a section of Irish nationalists on Easter Monday, April 24, 1916. There were around 1200 rebels which included the Irish Citizen Army, Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan and they protested in the prime locations of Dublin proclaiming the independence of Irish Republic. This uprising began with Padraig Pearse reading out the proclamation of Irish independence just outside GPO of Dublin city, his action found its artistic exposure in Yeats's writing, "He might have won fame in the end, / So sensitive his nature seemed, So daring and sweet his thought" (28-30). This rebellion could only last for six days due to Britain's successful regaining of Dublin city after almost destroying it (O'Neill). Even though this uprising was not supported widely during that time and was seen as a military failure. However, public opinion changed utterly after British firing squad executed 16 top leaders of the rebellion. Yeats was among those public whose view regarding uprising changed with the flow of time. Key figures of the uprising included- Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Thomas MacDonagh, Joseph Plunkett, Thomas Clarke, among others. These executions touched the Irish hearts ultimately igniting the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). Thus, Easter Rising appeared as a turning point in Irish history of resistance and sacrifice.

Another civil unrest was brewing in Spain during this era. The Spanish Civil War was a violent conflict between two groups of Spain- the Republicans who supported the democratic and elected government and the nationalists, a right-wing rebel group led by army General Francisco Franco. Rooted in deep political and economic separation in Spain, this civil war rose as ideological battle ground between fascism and democracy. These Spanish divisions draw the attention of international politics where the Republicans were supported by communists and international volunteers while Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy provided enormous support for the Nationalists. In 1936, a coup d'état was initiated by the generals from Spanish army in Morocco which led by General Francisco Franco. During that time Manuel Azaña, a democratically elected Republican president was overthrown. Then the civil war was inevitable causing over 500,000 deaths and Franco established a dictatorship which lasted until 1975. This traumatic experience left behind repression and censorship which inspired many writers to hold their pens against it like W.H Auden did in his poem by portraying emotional and societal tensions of the war.

From a New Historicist perspective, a literary text can be examined alongside the author's biography and the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of its historical period. The approach also considers non-literary texts and contemporary cultural events in order to understand how the broader historical milieu contributes to the production and interpretation of a literary work (Mangione). Historical poetry is a type of poetry which is passed on the real incidents or events. This literary genre presents the historical story using artistic language and poetic style. Many historical poems focus on the subject matter of war

or unrest because it not only shows the conflict among people but also captured the changing thought and feeling of a society (Patterson). Auden's "Spain" was written as a response to Spanish Civil War (1936–39) which made the country conflicting ground for socialists and fascists. The poem advances with the time- reflecting on the causes of war in the "yesterday", portraying the struggle of "today", and imagining the results of "tomorrow". This poem is shaped by Auden's political soft corner for the Republicans and his deep belief on the importance of individual duties in the time of crisis. His line "But to-day the struggle" (Auden) reflects the urgency of the situation, and how it is important to take action rather than reflection. The original version of the poem was published in 1937 with its revenue going for the support of war-ridden people. Later in 1940, he republished a slightly revised version and finally rejecting it during 1939 mentioning the poem as "dishonest". Auden showed regret about his earlier political views which shows how literary texts can be reinterpreted over time. Literature is deeply rooted in the cultural and political ground in which it is produced and "Easter 1916" is an evident of that. It is a direct response to the Irish uprising of 1916. Yeats had personal relation with some of the rebels of the uprising and so he had mixed feelings towards them. His personal point of view is merged with mass feelings is presented through his writing. "A terrible beauty is born" (Yeats 16)- his famous line captured the turmoil and transformation by posing an oxymoronic presentation. Both poems are influenced by historical incidents of the countries with which the poets were connected to. It is a demonstration that literature cannot be isolated for the history; it is born out of history and its meaning continues to evolve with the changing time and history which is the most significant portion of New Historicism.

Interpreting any historical poetry has a deep significance because it often reflects the poet's own emotional ties with the events. "The author's intention as realized is the 'intention' that counts, not necessarily what he was conscious of trying to do, or what he now remembers he was then trying to do" (Brooks). During the Spanish Civil War, solidarity emerged globally from every corner of the world where young volunteers came to help the affected people to fight against the anti-fascist cause. This unity became an example of world solidarity for a nation. Among these volunteers, Auden, an English young poet, came to Barcelona in 1937 to serve as an ambulance driver for the International Brigade which directly connected him with the war. Right after returning from Spain, he wrote "Spain" from the time of Marco Polo, connecting it through Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and Industrialization, to Auden, "Yesterday the shadow-reckoning in the sunny climates..." (Auden 4). The poem is strutted to depict past, present and future showing the history as well as hope. Auden presented history as a guiding force during the tough times of wars, as he wrote "O show us/ History the operator, the/ Organiser. Time the refreshing river." (Auden 33-35). On the other hand, the Irish Nationalists who became heroes afterwards after losing their lives were unknown to Yeats, he cannot clearly remember if he had ever met them, "I have passed with a nod of the head/ Or polite meaningless words" (Yeats). John MacBride was an exception for Yeats but he held mostly hatred for MacBride when he was alive describing him as "drunken vainglorious lout" (Yeats) because he married the woman, Maud Gonne, whom Yeats used to love much. However, keeping aside his personal feelings, Yeats gave him a similar place to MacBride, in "Easter 1916", as other heroic rebels, Constance Markievicz, his friend from childhood described him as "that woman" (17); Thomas MacDonagh who was Pearse's "helper and

friend" (24) and the Irish teacher Padraic Pearse who "kept a school" (26). Both poems are the reflection of how poet's surrounding and personal or, political encounter deeply shapes the presentation and subject matter of the poem.

As per New Historicists, the historical events influence the writers to write and in the same way writers' writings have a direct impact in the path of history which either receive high praise or criticism. In a letter to a friend E. R. Dodds, Auden wrote, "I am not one of those who believe that poetry need or even should be directly political. But in a critical period, such as ours, I do believe that the poet must have direct knowledge of the major political events." (Mendelson 22). In the beginning Auden supported the Republican cause being a leftist American writer but as the time went by, he himself saw the atrocities of both sides and how war can be devastating for common people.

Auden portrayed in his poem how past, present, and future all are connected in a string. The poem starts by looking back at the history by showing how people have learned, and built civilizations. Then a sudden shift is posed where the war situation of Spain is depicted with the repeated line, "But to-day the struggle," (Auden 16) by continuously reminding the readers that the war is a grave matter which cannot be ignored. However, Auden dreams of a better future where there will be peace, love and development. But it will be only possible when people would rise above and take action today. The poem establishes a strong message that everyone- big or, small- has a role to play in shaping history. George Orwell praised Spain as, "one of the few decent things that have been written about the Spanish war," (Orwell 510) at the same time he criticized him for the phrase, "necessary murder" (Auden) mentioning that such a phrase could only be written by someone for whom murder is just a word which has no other significance. This sheer criticism pointed at Auden's political inexperience or, detachment. In the same manner poet Edgell pointed at the repeated line "To-day the struggle," and sarcastically presented it in this way, "To-day the struggle, tomorrow the poetry and the fun," (Rickword) and claimed that this kind of attitude was completely different and foreign to the intellectuals of Spain during that time. These criticisms as well as Auden's own separation from communism influenced him to disown the poem in later life.

On the other hand, Yeats turned to contemporary issues after the incident of the Easter Rising. In the poem, he equally honored everyone who was involved in the rebellion- even John Macbride- someone whom he personally disliked. By presenting them in the bright light, Yeats showed that the sacrifice of the heroes transcended personal issues, rather it represented a collective step towards shaping Ireland's historical foundation. Despite his efforts to stay impersonal, many readers and critics still talk about the way Yeats presented MacBride in the beginning because of his personal rivalry.

From New Historicists' angle, cultural forms not only present or reflect but inevitably shape different social realities. It mostly happens in two ways either by reinforcing or challenging the existing power structures and strong, dominant ideologies. Cultural critique must consider the material conditions under which a literary text is produced along with its connections with the dominant power and social structures (Nayar 207). This idea aligns with Marxist key points about rising conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In "Easter 1916", Yeats starts his poem by positioning himself as a member of the upper class, intentionally distancing himself from the gathering of the common people. He rarely exchanged small talk with when he went for work, but he also mocked their account when

he was with the elite class. From the direct lines of Yeats "I have passed with a nod of the head/ Or polite meaningless words...Of a mocking tale or a gibe/ To please a companion/ Around the fire at the club" (Yeats 5-12). However, the poem marks a turning point, "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born." (Yeats 15-16). Despite the failure of the uprising, the sacrifices of the rebels laid the groundwork of the future Ireland. However, Yeats faced criticism about his literary roots being planted firmly with British or, English Romantic Tradition, especially that of Blake and Shelley and it is said that the poem has the reflection of it. Besides, "Yeats, in any event, tried to write a poem on Rising that Donne might admire even as it would also satisfy the Dublin public and convey his own ambivalence toward the events of 1916" (Perloff 231). Yeats had a mixed feeling regarding the rebellion. He admired the rebels but was also unsure about whether the Rising was truly worth the cost. As he knew about the sensitivity and controversiality of the issue, he only printed 25 copies of the poem- only for private circulation. In contrast, Auden's "Spain" is a war poem which breaks the traditional concepts and depictions of war and combat. It does not show any vivid portrayal of battle scenes or outcries, rather it depicts an abstract picture of war's reflection and impact on humanity in general. The poem points directly towards the suffering of the poor- presently and historically- as they continue to be burnt under the wrath of war of dominant parties. Auden writes, "And the poor in their fireless lodgings, dropping the sheets / Of the evening paper: 'Our day is our loss. O show us / History the operator, the / Organizer. Time the refreshing river.'" (Auden 33-36). Here, he suggests how history can be both a guide and a burden for commoners as the present is shaped by the unresolved struggles of the past.

Conclusion:

The study brings to the light the complex historical and conditions of 20th century Ireland and Spain. This turmoil influenced W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden to hold their pens in depicting the chaos of uprising and war in the poems "Easter 1916" where Irish struggle for independence is showed and "Spain" which is representation of the broader ideological battles of the century. These poems not only reflect the chaos and uncertainty of their times but also bring out the beauty and responses of the individuals who were going through this struggle. Through their poems, Yeats and Auden, discussed the ideas of power, sacrifice and history. Their writing included the Marxists ideas especially through question the unfair power system. They showed, to bring a change, not just leader but also ordinary people come out holding their zeal and spirit. This is how, New Historicist point of view, through "Easter 1916" and "Spain", shows that literature is not written in isolation, instead it is directly connected to the social, cultural and political incidents and situation of that time.

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