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# A Terrible Beauty is Born! Cultivating Critical Consciousness Using Trauma as Visual Metadata in Yeats's Poetry of Resistance, "Easter, 1916"

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# Visual Imagery, Metadata, and Multimodal Literacies Across the Curriculum

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## Chapter 6

# A Terrible Beauty is Born! Cultivating Critical Consciousness Using Trauma as Visual Metadata in Yeats's Poetry of Resistance, "Easter, 1916"

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this chapter is to examine William Butler Yeats's use of trauma as visual metadata during the Easter Rebellion in 1916 to raise critical consciousness for future rebellions in Ireland. Previous examinations of Yeats's "Easter, 1916" focus almost exclusively on the call for rebellion. This appeal however overlooks Yeats's challenge to preserve the spirit of resistance by focalizing on the unseen liberation within him and Ireland that remained despite the failed rebellion. With 2016 marking 100 years of "Easter, 1916," as the most popular of Yeats's political poems, the rhetorical appeal in this chapter will take a cognitive rather than aesthetic approach to illuminate Yeats's epistemic ambition in "Easter, 1916." This chapter represents an attempt to evaluate "Easter, 1916" also as poetry of resistance, but to analyze the extent to which Yeats employs visualizing as metadata to constitute and govern his audience's visualizing practices to inspire civic and political action.*

### INTRODUCTION

*Exile is more than a geographical concept.*

*You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room.*

*-Mahmoud Darwish (as cited in Shatz, 2001).*

William Butler Yeats visually contextualizes his nationalist pathos in the political poem, "Easter, 1916," over the Easter Rebellion in Ireland on April 24, 1916. By cultivating his audience's critical consciousness through poetic imagery, Yeats guides his audience through devastation and death in "Easter, 1916" by visually coaching them from political surveillance and voyeurism to civic and political action. Although

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the Easter Rebellion was a revolutionary failure against British Imperialist rule and Yeats was torn between his modern and idyllic visions of Ireland, “Easter, 1916” remains a compulsively political visual lyric. For example, Yeats rhetorically coaches his audience on how to visualize the political ideology of “Easter, 1916” using visual trauma as metadata to mediate the citizen agitators who were arrested by the British, charged with treason, and executed by firing squad. By using the refrain “a terrible beauty is born,” Yeats is referring to the expansion of the nationalist group Sinn Féin and the rise of civic and political activism by ordinary citizens in the aftermath of the Easter Rebellion. Yeats is also making a tacit argument on the way visual public trauma can be used to trigger civic and political action.

For instance, months after the failed Easter Rebellion Yeats writes, “I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me—and I am very despondent about the future” (Malins, 1962, p.13). Yeats uses his lingering embodied experience of “Easter, 1916” to examine the images that haunted him, but also to resist being instrumentalized by the political imaginary of British Imperialism. Yeats demonstrates that traumatic visual imagery can embolden Socratic reflection and cultivate a critical consciousness relaxed by conventional institutional practices. For Yeats, witnessing the failed 1916 Easter Rebellion in Ireland was an enabling trauma because it helped him to expose British Imperialist rule and shape the critical consciousness of his audience in “Easter, 1916.” Yeats is keenly aware of the visual as ideological metadata and he re-mediate the representation of the Easter Rebellion trauma as a product of British Imperialism rather than as objective truth. For instance, in the first and third stanza there are sixteen lines, perhaps referring to the sixteen in 1916, the year of the rebellion, and the second and fourth stanza have twenty-four lines, which one can infer references the first day of the Easter rebellion—April 24. With such poetic annotations to the revolutionary act embedded in “Easter, 1916,” Yeats’s use of key numbers from the Easter Rebellion as visual metadata of the failed insurrection secures the Easter rebellion as history to remember.

In “Easter, 1916,” then, Yeats reminds us that seeing is not believing—but interpretation—which plays a great role in cultivating critical consciousness into transformative civic and political action. Without question, “People need to be literate in a great variety of different semiotic domains” (Gee, 2003, P. 19) and this chapter argues that using trauma as visual metadata is one of those domains that is not only semiotic, but also epistemic. By examining trauma as visual metadata in this chapter I will demonstrate Yeats’s illumination in the power of the unseen in “Easter, 1916” as a call for civic and political action for social justice in Ireland.

This chapter will provide a close reading of Yeats’s use of trauma as visual metadata in “Easter, 1916,” his canonized poetry of resistance. The first section will define poetry of resistance and analyze the first stanza. The second section reviews the second and third stanzas and will juxtapose trauma and Yeats’s use of visual metadata as an appeal to explain the resistance of the ingrained social ideals that the agitators in Easter 1916 reacted to. The third section analyzes the last stanza and Yeats’s visual appeal to his fellow Dubliners to awaken from their anesthetic comfort to rebellious agitation for the sake of liberty. The chapter concludes with how modern day authors from any genre can both artfully and lyrically use poetry of resistance to inspire the citizenry to see the unseen for civic and political transformation.

## **YEATS: POET OF RESISTANCE**

William Butler Yeats was haunted by the failed Easter Rebellion in Dublin, Ireland on April 24, 1916, which he canonized in his political poem, “Easter, 1916.” The poem, noted as one of the most popular

and anthologized political poems of the twentieth century has as its central theme Ireland's new political order. However, "Easter, 1916" quickly pivots from a conventional poetic statement narrativizing the events of the failed Easter Rebellion, to igniting the critical consciousness of his fellow Dubliners against the occupying tyranny of the British. Yeats uses strategic discursive visualizing to discover and translate the events of "Easter, 1916" which forever transformed the political climate of Ireland. Yeats enables his fellow Dubliners to understand the social injustice of the British by intensifying the visual trauma of the Easter Rebellion. While he never uses overt political rhetoric to name and expose the British as oppressive and cruel imperialists, Yeats quietly but deliberately influences his readers in a poet's perspective fueled with resistance.

Yeats's achievement in "Easter, 1916" is remarkable given in the twentieth century political resistance in literature to social and political injustice was the province of literary authors. Rarely, if any poets were recognized for stoking the political conscience of an entire society. This lack of acknowledgement by the literary hierarchy of recognizing poets that instilled revolutionary ideology in their poetic compositions interested Barbara Harlow. In *Resistance Literature*, Harlow investigates and criticizes Western institutions and their hierarchical categories of literary creations that hesitate to acknowledge the political significance of poetic works and the failure to label them as resistance literature. Harlow writes that:

*The political function of the poet, more so even than that of the literary critic, has been much contested amongst writers. The longstanding tradition of that debate, one which is not unique to western literary schools of thought, does find there a particularly coherent historical formulation. (Harlow, 1987, p.15)*

Harlow believes there are many possible utterances of resistance literature with poetry being one of them. Instead of giving a prescriptive notion of resistance literature, Harlow is descriptive and thus broadens the term to traverse the entirety of Western literature. As for a definition of resistance literature, she writes:

*Resistance literature calls attention to itself, and to literature in general, as a political and politicized activity. The literature of resistance sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production. (Harlow, 1987, pp. 28-29)*

As a literary theorist, Harlow no doubt believes in qualifying a term, but not in rigid sanctions like the Western institutions that she criticizes. And so, retrospectively, she offers a fair-minded qualification of resistance literature that mediates between all genres without the rhetorical containment of the term in any specific literary genre to hold as theoretical power over another. "The theory of resistance literature" Harlow writes "is in its politics" (Harlow, 1987, p.30).

This chapter will take a similar move and qualify poetry of resistance in less prescriptive terms and more descriptive terms to allow whatever literary viewpoints it encounters to give rise to new and fresh constitutions. Therefore, in this chapter, poetry of resistance is a poetic composition with deliberate revolutionary ideals in support of radical social and political transformation. Poetry of resistance recognizes ideological power as a discursive frame for the formation of subjects and poetically resists acts of social and political methods of societal disempowerment. As a Jewish feminist lesbian poet, Adrienne Rich muses on the use and effect of poetry stating, "poetry can break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire" (Rich, 1993, p. xiv).

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Given the monikers Rich uses to identify her standpoint, it is no wonder that she understands perseverance and prosecution for being Other and the heavy weight that such a political identity imposes on an individual. Yeats, like Rich, heightens the reality of ordinary life only to illustrate it as a space for grand transformation. Yeats writes in the first stanza of “Easter, 1916” that:

*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,  
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  
Around the fire at the club,  
Being certain that they and I  
But lived where motley is worn:  
All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born. (1-16)*

In the first stanza, Yeats reflects on Ireland in visually illuminating language that speaks to the dreary and monotonous tone of a nation where historical stasis appears to loom everywhere at the “close of day” (1). Even the jobs of the Easter Rebellion anarchists—men and women he knows, were dismal and dull to Yeats since they sat at the “counter or desk among grey Eighteen century houses” (3-4). Yeats suggests that all is the same even “with a nod of the head” (5) the repetitiveness of their lives ends and it begins with “polite meaningless words” (8). With such a history, Yeats believes, perhaps like so many of his fellow Dubliners that change “a mocking tale or a gibe” (10) was nothing more than a utopian notion and Yeats, like all Dubliners “lived where motley is worn” (14). Yeats makes a dramatic visual shift at the end of the stanza to speak to the suddenness and the flowering of transformation when “All changed, change utterly” (15). For Yeats, the political violence of the Eastern Rebellion was alternatively cruel, picturesque, and fascinating, but still incongruous and thus, “A terrible beauty is born” (16).

His insistence on labelling the event through visually incompatible language demonstrates that Yeats is allowing his fellow Dubliners to explore the Easter Rebellion within their own visual framing since many of them were eye witnesses to the uprising. Yeats sensed there was no going back for himself or his fellow Dubliners to the numbing continuity of hegemony with British imperialism. “At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature from politics” (Malins, 1962, p.13-14). By invoking a visual perspective to serve as metadata or information about information in “Easter, 1916,” Yeats intersects the trauma of the Easter Rebellion within the trauma of his fellow Dubliners’s everydayness. The everyday trauma which Yeats describes in casual but vivid detail of lived numbness under British rule, amplifies the political action of the Eastern Rebellion. For Yeats, then, one event could not be seen without the other and the distance between the two was now in reach, although in a new Dublin. “I perfectly remember the vision, and my making

light of it saying that if a true vision at all it could only have symbolized meaning” (Malins, 1962, p.14). When Yeats uses the refrain “A terrible beauty is born” (16), then, it is because he clearly understands how *inadequate* any literary form is to *adequately* convey the horror of the Easter Rebellion. Therefore, within a visual assemblage of trauma, Yeats uses weighty visual imagery to mediate the resistance in the poetry of “Easter, 1916” and raise the critical consciousness of a politically transformed Dublin.

## **Critical Consciousness and the Poetry of Resistance**

*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?  
This man had kept a school  
And rode our winged 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.  
This other man I had dreamed  
A drunken, vain-glorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart,  
Yet I number him in the song;  
He, too, has resigned his part  
In the casual comedy;  
He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born. (17-40)*

Yeats took issue with the Easter Rebellion because at the time he did not consider himself a political poet. Although he knew many of the agitators, he did not believe in violence as a method for creating an Irish republic free of British imperialism. And yet, Yeats memorializes them in “Easter, 1916,” perhaps as a signal for new patriots to finish the failed uprising. Or, to effectively explore and process the rebellion, the radical change of Ireland, and the loss of people he genuinely cared for in the only medium he knew how—poetry. In short, Yeats examines the social, political, and ideological forces behind the trauma of the Easter Rebellion. This is important because trauma is about representation—explicitly and tacitly. Rather than disregarding the Easter Rebellion, Yeats works through the trauma of the rising by working back to the agitators and their ideology to construct meaning for the reader in a structure he knows—poetry. As trauma expert Judith Herman describes it, “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them out” (Herman, 1992, p. 1). Herman goes further to give us an insight into Yeats and

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the visual task of telling the Easter Rebellion. Herman writes that, “Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (Herman, 1992, p. 1). For example, Yeats writes, “All my habits of thought and work are upset by this tragic Irish rebellion which has swept away friends and fellow-workers” (Malins, 1962, p. 16). Despite the ambiguity over the Easter Rebellion, Yeats’s reticent attitude towards politics shifted and he gradually emerged, like Ireland, to a new world view. By instilling visual cues in “Easter, 1916” Yeats both illuminates and manages the traumatic memory of the rebellion and the deaths. Like Yeats, his fellow Dubliners could neither psychologically flee nor psychologically fight the intense imagery of the Easter Rebellion. This is not uncommon for people who experience traumatic events because “when neither resistance nor escape is possible,” posits Judith Herman “the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized. Each component of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over” (Herman, 1992, p. 34). By incorporating visual imagery as metadata to induce the critical consciousness of his fellow Dubliners to action with visually stimulating words, Yeats shares character traits of some of the key figures in the political poem to individuate them and then to visually connect them in a tacit celebratory tone.

Yeats is referring to Constance Markievicz, “That woman’s” days” (17) to represent her activism while also trivializing her for it. Yeats, once again, conflates an image with a second one that appears to counter the first visual representation. Rather than depict the Easter Rebellion in a one-dimensional fashion, Yeats also visually complicates agitators like Markievicz as equally powerful and disquieting as she labors in “ignorant good will” (18). Yeats goes on to describe Markievicz’s voice as “shrill” (20) and “sweet” (21) and writes that she is “young” and beautiful” (22). Yeats’s characterization of Markievicz suggests to the reader that Yeats knows her well. For how can he write so knowingly about Markievicz’s character unless he was familiar with “her nights in argument” (19) about her revolutionary ideals for a sovereign Ireland? By interweaving personal details of Markievicz to the rebellion in “Easter, 1916,” the resistance poem is a strong foreshadowing of the modern refrain “the personal is political” to illustrate the inextricable convergence of one’s life to political structures. As Herman puts it, “The attempt to avoid reliving the trauma too often results in a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and an impoverished [emotional] life” (Herman, 1992, p.42). However, rather than overtly being a trumpet for the agitators of the resistance, Yeats creates an ideological and visual matrix of the Easter Rebellion in “Easter, 1916” as an appeal to remember the human cost of a nation reborn.

Yeats continues using ambiguous metaphorical visual images to try and fill the gap between his personal vision of the resistance and the reality of the tragic day. Yeats’s ambiguity is common for witnesses of trauma. “People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner” (Herman, 1992, p. 1). Throughout “Easter, 1916” many scholars have noted the nonlinear approach in the resistance poem; however, Yeats provides the reader with several visual markers to ground the poem and reinforce the cultural and political significance of the Easter Rebellion. The irony is that despite the failure of the rebellion, it presented Ireland with a powerful incentive to continue the resistance. Nevertheless, before Ireland takes up arms again, Yeats seems to suggest that the nation have a reflective pause to remember those idealists who were his friends. Yeats, once again, uses the trauma of the Easter Rebellion as visual metadata to embody the men who died that day. It is important to know that Yeats has not yet employed more visceral and direct words like “death,” “dying,” and “die,” to shape the critical consciousness of his readers. Rather, in the second stanza he places emphasis on the character of specific agitators. No doubt their names were revealed in news accounts, but

empty of details that would humanize them. This is common because a familial framing is the “primary instrument of universalization” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 51). Furthermore, the Easter Rebellion was a collective trauma, although experienced individually.

For example, Yeats describes Patrick Pearse as the “man [who] had kept a school and rode our winged horse” (24-25) and Thomas MacDonagh “this other his helper and friend” (26) to present the noble life of these men, despite the failure of rebellion. The clear reference to Pegasus in relation to Pearse characterizes him as a noble man and a respected leader. But Yeats shifts the readers visualizing by referring to Major John Macbride as “this other man” (31) who was “a drunken, vain-glorious lout” (32), and despite Macbride’s character flaws Yeats writes, “still I number him in the song” (35). One can argue that this is the first overt political statement in “Easter, 1916” for songs are written for a battle or those who fall in the battle. Yeats posits that even the unworthy Macbride was “transformed utterly” (39) by the rebellion and deserves recognition for his moment of heroism. “Easter, 1916,” then, is a song on the virtue of political struggle and the women and men who hope and advocate for a utopian vision that perhaps they can only see. Yeats, once again, closes this twenty-four-line stanza with the refrain, “A terrible beauty is born” (40) after a visual tribute to the agitators and as an appeal for the reader to imagine, as the fallen did, what is possible.

*Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter, seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.  
The horse that comes from the road,  
The rider, the birds that range  
From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
Minute by minute change.  
A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse-hoof slides on the brim;  
And a horse plashes within it  
Where long-legged moor-hens dive  
And hens to moor-cocks call.  
Minute by minute they live:  
The stone’s in the midst of all. (41-56)*

In stanza three Yeats moves from the specific to the abstract although he reminds the reader that the agitators in stanza two were, “hearts with one purpose alone” (41) and he adds they were singularly devoted to their cause “through summer and winter” (42). Once again Yeats uses vivid imagery to remind the reader of the trauma without giving details of the trauma. We must remember that the Easter Rebellion was a visual trauma to Dubliners just like 9-11 was to New Yorkers—everybody witnessed some aspect of it—individually and collectively. Like many revolutionaries, Yeats posits they were wedded to their cause since they were “enchanted to a stone” (43) and unyielding even if it stirred conflict and would “trouble the living stream” (44) with their fellow Dubliners. These visual images are important because they are both political and psychoanalytic—could Yeats be referring to himself or even Ireland as “a shadow of cloud on the stream” (49) as mist that flows across the stream changing with no real effect?

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Once again, Yeats invokes the common everyday societal behavior to shake his fellow Dubliners out of their stoicism. He suggests that these mundane practices become harmful and problematic when they do not recognize the accumulation of British imperialism and become agents of their own oppression. For Yeats, the agitators were steady in their revolutionist ideas, but unyielding “in the midst of it all” (56). That is, unyielding despite the British driven hegemonic ideals that infected their routine everyday duties unnoticed except by the agitators.

### **Trauma as Stone and Death in Visual Metadata**

*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,  
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.  
Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said.  
We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead.  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse—  
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. (57-80)*

Like the second stanza, the last stanza is twenty-four lines—a subtle reference to the first day of the rebellion—April 24. Yeats broadens his imagery of the stone as symbolic of commitment and consistency with “Too long a sacrifice” (57) regarding liberation and awakening the critical consciousness of a nation. Therefore, he asks when is enough “O when may it suffice?” (59) for one to remain in their state of oppression and with a civility that appeases the oppressed? But Yeats goes even further when he says, “As a mother names her child When sleep at last has come” (62-63) when he uses sleep as an abstract metaphor for death. In the preceding lines, Yeats becomes less abstract and more concrete to represent the death of his friends from his traumatic memory as if he made a mistake and wants to correct it saying, “No, no, not night but death. (66). Yeats pushes against the idea of night being synonymous with death by calling on Ireland to collectively respond to the deaths asking, “Was it needless death

after all?” (67). For Yeats, this is where the psychic, political, and human aspect of trauma merge for not only is he responding to his questions, he is also asking questions of his fellow Dubliners as well. Yeats also seems to suggest that the agitators were correct and peaceful acquiescence is not an option “for England may keep faith” (68) and that Ireland’s dead reacted out of an “excess of love” (72). In this final stanza, Yeats once again invokes the seemingly incongruous refrain, “A terrible beauty is born” (80) to illuminate his conflicting perspective on the Easter Rebellion.

## CONCLUSION

One does not have to be a poet to use trauma both artfully and lyrically as visual metadata for civic and political transformation. However, like Yeats, using vivid imagery as metadata as “information about information” generates another layer of understanding for the reader. Given the image saturated world that we inhabit, images are no longer, if they ever were, cognitively subordinate to written text. Instead of using photographic trauma, using trauma in image rich text can elevate the critical consciousness of readers by stoking their way of thinking. Resistance poetry is more than just ideas and facts wrapped in beautiful language. Resistance poetry enables a reader to understand the complexities of rebellion and resistance and the violence that often provokes it by visually illuminating the complexities of trauma, but also the difficulties in explaining trauma. With the robust abundance of images in social spaces and electronic learning, it is easy to be pushed into a collective world view. However, using trauma as visual metadata, like Yeats, opens a space in the critical consciousness for the disintegration of old ways of perceiving for new ways of perceiving. This is important for teachers to inspire their students to see the unseen—no matter how difficult—for civic and political transformation to occur.

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## **KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Agitator:** An individual who protests injustice.

**Cognitive Approach:** The way an individual processes information to understand.

**Ideology:** The framework through which the subject filters knowledge.

**Imperialism:** Rule of one country by another by force or dependence.

**Rebellion:** Open resistance or violence to oppressive power(s).

**Semiotic Domain:** A modality for communication.

**Socratic Reflection:** The minor in which ideas, issues, and values are engaged.

**Visuality:** The social and cultural process of looking.