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Lecture No. 25
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English (Hons.)
DIII Paper VI: Modern Literature

(1)

Topic: W.B. Yeats as a poet

William Butler Yeats was born at Sandymount near Dublin in a family that is said to have migrated from Yorkshire England to Ireland in the seventeenth century. His grandfather's name was Reverend Butler Yeats who, as the Rector of the Church of England was inclined towards Evangelicalism. W.B. Yeats' intellectual leanings and brilliance can be traced back to his genes in the fact of his father being a man of considerable intellectual accomplishment. He was, as a matter of fact, a man of varied interests but strong opinions — passing on these personality traits to his son in no small measure. Yeats, born in 1865, wielded his pen as a major dramatist and poet, straddling the ~~first~~ second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth with equal felicity before he died in 1939. "His genius", as Hudson rightly points out, "however, was more poetic than dramatic".

As a poet of the Modern Age W.B. Yeats is often compared with the other stalwart, i.e., T.S. Eliot as regard to their greatness and poetical prowess; and, for the majority of the critics, it is W.B. Yeats who holds the upper hand. This esteem and regard for him is borne out

② not out of his prolific literary output for a sustained period of time, but ~~is~~ is the result of the quality of his poetry which passes through various phases of development and maturity. Scores of critics have analysed and acknowledged his contribution in the poetic field with equal aplomb and praise. Among these names are E. Davis, C. M. Bowra, F. A. C. Wilson, Richard Edman and J. A. Richards to name a few. T. S. Eliot went on to comment on the fellow poet in "The Criterion" in these effusive words of affirmation to his greatness: "it must be apparent that Mr. Yeats has been and is the greatest poet of his time. I can think of no ~~one~~ poet, not even among the greatest, who has shown a longer period of development than Yeats." This consistency of quality, this sustained and continuous development of art and genius is the keynote of Yeats' poetry which is regarded by Eliot as a sign of genius.

W. B. Yeats, in his 50 years of poetic sojourn, was constantly becoming, maturing and growing different from what he was ~~in~~ at the outset. One does not come across any sudden break or departure from continuity. It is a slow evolution — the embryo of the future always always present in what has gone before. The seeds that are sown in the earliest phase

come to a gradual flowering in his later poetry.

Yeats's poetry, in course of this evolution, can be broadly divided into four phases. The early phase is very much different in tone and temper from his later phase poetry. Initially the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites is very much discernable in his poems. The qualities such as dreaminess, picturesqueness and mythological love can be traced back to them and are enough to assign, not so desirable ones like escapism and languorous atmosphere on account of inebriety and haunting rhythms. This mystic atmosphere is clearly a dominant note in his early poems such as "Wanderings of Odin", "Poems", "The Wind among the Reeds" and "Shadowy Waters", all of which appeared between 1895 and 1900. For these poems of his early period Yeats turns to his reservoir of racial memories full of magic and symbolic evocations in fine Celtic tradition. He was more at home in dreams than in actualities; more at ease in the world of symbols than in the stern realities of life; more in company with Beauty and Nature than with the sordid ugly things of life. Yeats is happy to declare: "The wrong of unshapely thing is a wrong too great to be told."

But this desire to remain aloof from the ugly realities of life and be ~~stuffed~~ ^{engulfed} in a make-believe world of dreams was soon to

give way to the naked realities of the day after the year 1900; heralding the advent of a new year, more steeped ⁱⁿ and aware of as he became about the stern realities of the world. This increased realism is there for all to see in his ^{later} poems such as "The Green ~~and~~ Helmet and Other Poems (1910), and ^{and} Responsibilities (1914). It was the time when World War I was to alter the thinking of almost every sensitive person and Yeats was no exception. The grim, gloomy and sorrowful philosophy accentuated ^{troublesome} due to the war which was reinforced by the happenings in Ireland, made him write such poems as "The Wild Swans at Coole", "The Tower (1928)", "The Winding ~~Stair~~ Stair and Other Poems" (1933), "New Poems" 1938, and "Last Poems (1939). The poems are characterized by stark-naked realism, brutality and coarseness and with masculine vigour and force.

Thus Yeats' journey as a poet which starts on the vehicle of symbolism and imagery, passing through the realms of mysticism, successfully negotiates the clashing peaks and turns of dreaminess and realism before reaching the plains of nationalism and patriotism to peg the tent. Louis Cazamian ^{says}: "Yeats work is more thoroughly steeped than any other in the imaginative mysticism which... is the essential attribute of Celticism, ... its inspiration no doubt derives strong nourishment from the racy sap of the soil. But it draws well on foreign and distant influences. India and her pantheism come in for growing share in it. French symbolism has been more and more responsible for the general manner of its expression."

—X—X—X— (concluded.)