

B.A (Eng. Hons)
Part - III
Paper - VI

Shailesh Ranjan
Assist. Professor
Dept. of English
Maharaja College, Ara

W.B. Yeats : As a poet

W.B. Yeats is regarded as a major English poet of modern age. Critics have no hesitation in placing him higher than T.S. Eliot, not because of the bulk and length of his poetic career but because of the quality of his poetry which passes through various phases of development and maturity and his contribution to English poetry. J.W. Beach calls him the finest of the British poets of the modern age, and Edith Sitwell writes of him and his poetry: "It is forty years since the earliest of the great poems gave new life to the language, and today they spring in to our consciousness anew, as if we heard them for the first time, and the wonders and splendours of the latest poems are ever greater, since they have grown from a deeper wisdom a more universal experiment."

William Butler Yeats, born at Sandymouth near Dublin on June 13, 1865, was the eldest son of John Butler Yeats. W.B. Yeats's grandfather Reverend Butler Yeats was the Rector of the Church of Ireland. The Rector loved sports and dancing and was inclined to evangelicalism. The family perhaps migrated from Yorkshire (England) to Ireland in the seventeenth century. Yeats received his education from

Trinity College and Royal Academy. His stay at the Royal Academy proved to be a boon in his literary pursuits. George Russell, known to literature as 'A.E.' strengthened Yeats in his learning towards the occult.

Yeats's work is uniformly good even though he writes on such varied subjects as ancient legend, mythology, folklore, politics, history, love, individual friends and distinct events and makes new myths of his own. His creative range is immense, he writes with perfect ease and mastery on themes taken from every possible sphere of life, and a high standard of performance is maintained through out. In his early poetry, the poet is an escapist and romantic. He has been influenced by Shelley, Keats and Pre-Raphaelite poets. According to an Indian critic, "Yeats's early poetry is mainly escapist. The two trends, however, can be easily traced out in his early poetry - his romantic longing and his nationalist urge to revive the Celtic past. His attitude in his later poetry is harsh and bitter. His frustration in love and his bitter experiences in politics shattered his beliefs and produced this harsh, sardonic tone. Where as the former note can be easily seen in a poem like 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', the latter one is reflected in the poems of the collection entitled 'The Tower' and also of 'The Winding Stair: ~~One~~

Ireland is the major theme of his poetry. Ireland is always in the poet's mind. He wanted to make Ireland a heaven though he failed. He has exploited to the full the saga of Ireland and Celtic legends. His poems like Fergus and the Druid, Chuchulain's Fight with the Sea,

The Song of Wandering Aengus, Easter, 1916 and others are based on Irish mythology and the Irish politics.

Most of the Yeats poems of the matured period are mystical and therefore complex. A remarkable achievement of Yeats was in the field of masks. Yeats' theory of the 'mask' is closely related to his philosophical system, which he like Blake, fabricated as a refuge from the growing pressure of the scientific and materialistic world around him. In Yeats' verse, a series of ideas recur. They express pride of life, defiance of vulgarity, anxiety about the future or refusal to accept despair. The only way in which poetry can be philosophical, Yeats brilliantly declared, is by portraying 'the emotions' of a soul dwelling in the presence of certain ideas. The main ideas found in Yeats' poetry are: reincarnation, the notion that soul passes through round after round of life (Hindu idea of rebirth), interest in imagination, imagery of God.

W.B. Yeats was a symbolist from the beginning to the end of his career. Arthur Symonds is certainly right in his assessment of Yeats as the chief exponent of the Symbolist movement in England. In the early phase of his career, his symbols are elementary and are no obstacles in the way of the meaning. A number of his early poems are organized round 'the rose', a symbol largely traditional and so easy to understand. But as the years passed on, his symbols became complex, personal and complicated. He made use of symbols to convey his inner sensations, his visions and trances and his mystic experiences which can not be conveyed in any other way. The 'Sword' is a masculine symbol for life, war, love and sex; the 'tower' is another complex symbol

which glances at Shelley, Milton, and Adam etc. and signifies mental elevation, noble contemplation, permanence of philosophy and out above the flux of life, the loneliness, his own and of all great thinkers in the world of petty calculators etc. Other symbols which abound in his mature poetry are sun, moon, silver, gold, dancer, wheel, gyre, fern, arrow etc. They are mostly drawn from Christian, Byzantine, Egyptian, Greek, Theosophical and magical words.

Yeats gave to English poetry animating rhythms. He was a great metrist who experimented with a variety of stanzas and verse-forms. He kept away from the verse libre and other technical innovations of his day, but he used the traditional metres and stanza forms with consummate skill. He freed the English lyric from the tyranny of the Dorian, and manipulated the stress, pause and cadence of the long line with great mastery and self-confidence. The Octosyllabic couplet he made particularly his own and brought out its full colloquial possibilities. He had a Donne like command over stanza structures and made his stanza patterns correspond with the movement of thought and emotion. The sudden shifts in tone and mood, often within the same line, further indicate Yeats's affinity with great poets.

Thus, Yeats has attained a significant place in the history of English poetry by his creative gifts. He had not only genius and great creative powers at his disposal, but also the inner conviction, wisdom and necessary craftsmanship of a true poet. He may not be a Shakespeare or a Milton, but occupies an important place just below the highest and greatest.

— x —