

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

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William Butler Yeats is one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. Even as he was an Irish man, he ranks with the greatest British poets of the Modern Age. G. S. Frazer in his book "The Modern Writer and His World" ranks Yeats with Donne and Milton and Wordsworth and considers him very much superior to Browning, Tennyson and Arnold. Besides, Frazer claims that the poetry of Yeats would enjoy a greater permanence and a more enduring population than the poetry either of T. S. Eliot or of Ezra Pound, because it is more coherent and more traditional than that of his two great contemporaries. His work is uniformly good even as he writes on such varied subjects as ancient legend, Irish Mythology, folklore, politics, history, love and constantly makes new myths of his own. His poetry is largely free from the freaks, whims and eccentricities as well as incoherent ramblings which are the hallmark of much Modern Poetry.

Yeats's career as a poet spans over fifty years. It is marked by sustained and continuous development of his art and genius. He is constantly becoming matured and growing different from his earlier stages. His early poetry is romantic and escapist. It smacks of the Pre-Raphaelite tradition. With the help of Irish Mythology and folk-lore, he weaves a world of

Celtic twilight of vague uncertain lights. It is for this reason that Graham Hough calls him. The significant volumes of this phase are *The Wind Among the Reeds*, *Crossways* and *The Rose*.

In the second phase of his poetic development, Yeats diverted his energy to writing verse plays after, with Lady George's help, he established the Irish National Theatre. His only volume of verses during this phase is "*In the Seven Woods*".

Yeats' third phase is that of transition. He discarded the romantic mode and was drawn to the intellectually more vigorous tradition of Donne and others. He began searching for symbols which could give meaning to history and life. This new austerity is reflected in *The Green Helmet* and *Responsibilities*.

The Fourth and Last phase of Yeats' poetic career is marked by "fullest maturity". The poetry of this period is characterized by strong rhythms, by stanza and rhyme patterns by severe diction, and by a range of symbols each of which is a nucleus of meanings. The most important volumes of verses of this phase are *The Wild Swans at Coole*, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*. This poem of this period are rich and complex and are full of urgency, intensity and immediacy.

A major theme of Yeats' poems is the class of opposites. His poetry, according to A.G., is a battle ground for the clash of opposites - the human and the non-human, spiritual and physical, sensuous and artistic, physical decay and intellectual

maturity, past and present, personal and impersonal, power and helplessness. In his early poetry, such opposites are merely tendered, but in later poetry, there is also an attempt at reconciling them.

Compression and intensity are the other features of Yeats' poetry. He can enclose vast immensities within the span of a short-lyric. "Easter and the Swan" is a classic example where the poet succeeds in compressing whole ages of history from the remote antiquity down to the present age. Another famous poem The Second Coming beautifully compresses with intensity Yeats' prophetic vision.

Yeats is a poet of mythopoeic imagination. Cleanth Brooks regards him as a great myth-maker and his vision as "the most ambitious attempt made by any poet of our time to set up a myth". In the very opening of "Easter 1916", we get the myth of Yeats' contemporaries coming out of the dead past to participate in the activity of the present. In this way, the present is exalted and imparted the universal significance of a myth.

Yeats had a rare creative gift. He had the inner conviction, he had wisdom, he had full command over his resources, was a great metrist who successfully experimented with a variety of stanza and verse forms.

His poetry reveals passion, intensity and fervour. There are the measures of a great poet. And Yeats, the Nobel Laureate, is certainly a very great poet of the 20th century.