UNIT 5 : W. B. YEATS : "AN IRISH AIRMAN FORESEES HIS DEATH"

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- familiarise yourself with the life and works of W. B. Yeats
- explain the context and content of the poem "An Irishman Foresees His Death"
- discuss the style and language of the poem
- appreciate the poem in its totality.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we have taken up a major poem titled "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" by W. B. Yeats. You must have heard and read on this great poet who had won Nobel prize for Literature in 1923. The poetry

of Yeats has great aesthetic beauty with a patriotic fervour particularly in relation to the Irish cause. In this unit, we will give you a birds'-eye view of the poet W. B. Yeats and his poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death". The focus in this unit is on this particular poem, regarding its context, style and language. There is also a textual discussion. After reading this unit you may be motivated into reading his other poems and about his eventful life as well as grasp the poetic techniques he uses.

5.3 W. B. YEATS: THE POET

W. B. Yeats was a famous Irish poet who bridges the gap between the Victorians and the Moderns. He began as a late Victorian romantic poet and ended as a twentieth century modern poet fully abreast of the newer generations. His poetic genius can be traced by comparing the beautiful, simple, romantic poems like "When you are Old", "Lake Isle of Innisfree" with the profound "Byzantium" poems that appeared much later. He is regarded as the national poet of Ireland and the Irish background forms the very ***crux*** of his poetry. Let us now, delve into the life of this poet and the numerous works he wrote.



Crux :root or core of something

Sligo: a county in their province of Connacht in the west of the Republic of Ireland

5.3.1 His Life

W. B. Yeats was an Irish poet born on June 13 in the year 1865 in Dublin. He was the eldest son of John Butler Yeats who was a painter and who was greatly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites. His mother was a homely girl from ***Sligo***. She was full of love for the country side. W. B. Yeats was greatly influenced by both his parents .The intellectual side of his personality can be attributed to his father and his mother was instrumental in kindling his emotional instincts.

W. B. Yeats, in his boyhood was actually ugly and lanky and therefore he was often ridiculed by the boys in the school. This made him very self-conscious. He often ran away from school and was also severely punished at home but to no avail.

In 1876, Yeats' family shifted to London but he stayed back and spent his carefree days in the magical countryside in Ireland with his grandparents .The beauty of the place kindled his emotions and for the first time he started expressing his thoughts in verse.

Here,in the country-side he was introduced to and fascinated by Irish folklore, fairy tales and the supernatural tales and he tried to blend these aspects into his poetry. When his family returned again in1880, he was sent to Harcourt High School in Dublin. His father's ***skepticism*** had an effect on him and he criticised Christianity outright. He was soon disgusted with school-life and gave up school. But he enjoyed reading books by Balzac, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, and others and their perusal left a deep impression on his mind.

Yeats later joined an art school and made friends with the well known philosopher George Russell. It was through Edward Dowden, a prominent writer, that some of his earliest poems were published.

In 1889, he published *The Wanderings of Oissin and other poems*. This volume is an outstanding landmark in the poetic career of Yeats. It was during this period that Yeats came into contact with Maud Gonne, the daughter of an English colonel and a revolutionary. She remained a constant source of inspiration for him and he often symbolised her as ***Helen of Troy***. It was during this period that he developed an interest in Indian theology as a result of his friendship with the Indian Purohit Swami who helped him in translating the *Upanishads*.

He joined the ***Rhymer's Club*** in 1891 and showed keen interest in *"**aestheticism**"* and the French Symbolist movement.

In 1896 he met Lady Gregory who became, for nearly forty years, a friend, patron and a co worker along with the dramatist, J. M. Synge. These two cast a lasting impression on his life, his personality and poetry.

And in the year 1902, he started working for the Irish National Theatre. He worked there till 1910. Since he was involved in many controversies he left everything and turned to poetry. After the death of John Macbride, husband of Maud Gonne, he again proposed to her but she refused. The disillusionment of his failure in love is clearly reflected in the



Skepticism : Doubt.

Helen of Troy : Helen is regarded as the most beautiful woman in Greek mythology. So in Greek mythology Helen better known as Helen of Sparta or Helen of troy was the daughter of Zeus and Leda, wife of king Menelaus of Sparta. Her abduction by Paris brought about the Trojan War. Helen was described by Christopher Marlowe as having 'the face that launched a thousand ships'.

Rhymer's Club :A group of poets who met at the Chesshire Cheese in Fleet Street between 1891 and 1894. It included its founders Ernest Rhys and W.B.Yeats, Richard Le Galliene, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, John Davidson, T. W. Rolleston, SelwynImage and Edwin Ellis.

Aestheticism: It is the term given to a movement, a cult, a mode of sensibility (a way of looking at and feeling about things) in the 19th century.

poems written during this period. In the year 1916 he was offered the Knighthood by the British government.

In 1917, he married Miss George Hyde Lees whom he had known for some years. His marriage brought stability to his life and it also proved to be the starting point of an altogether unexpected combination of the romantic and the realistic strains of his poetry. He lived a blissful married life with a daughter born in 1919 and a son in the year 1921. Along with the stability in his life came the maturity of his style.

Mrs Yeats attempted ***automatic writing*** and she produced odd sentences on subjects of which she knew nothing. Yeats was excited and stimulated and he spent hours in interpreting the "automatic script". Yeats was the co-founder of the Abbey Theatre and served as an Irish senator for a few years. In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. During the last phase of his life he sank into disillusionment and a sense of defeat and inadequacy enveloped him. In fact this sense of disillusionment led him to produce some of his best poetry. In the year 1927-28, he fell ill with consumption and though he recovered temporarily, he succumbed to this grave illness on January 28, 1939. He was buried in the churchyard at Drumcliff, near County Sligo. The epitaph on his gravestone reads: *Cast a cold eye on life, on death. Horseman, pass by.* –W. B. Yeats.

Automatic writing : writing which is attempted without conscious control. In this poem it is the writing of MrsYeats which came to her without any effort. She just went on writing in a state of trance under the influence of some supernatural agency. Yeats was fascinated by this sort of writing. He accepted this automatic writing as a supernatural phenomenon.

Trojan war: In Greek mythology, the Trojan war was waged against the city of troy by the archaens after Paris of troy stole Helen from her husband Menelaus, the King of Sparta.

Mysticism : religious or spiritual belief that is not clearly defined.



LET US KNOW

Yeats dominated the literary world in Ireland as a poet, playwright, essayist, autobiographer. His main poetical works from the Irish Renaissance are: *In the Seven Woods* (1904), *The GreenHelmet and Other Poems* (1910), *Responsibilities* (1914), *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), and *Michael Roberts and the Dancer* (1921).

5.3.2 His Works

Let us now, survey the major works of W. B. Yeats. His first publication was a play, *Mosado*(1886) and two years later he began with *The Wandering of Oisin*, a series of ballads and poems that established

his reputation. His important poetical works like *The Rose* (1893)*, The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) was formed from his knowledge of Irish folklore and folktales, and his interest in mysticism and the occult. Irish history and the recent surge in Irish nationalism, together with his adoration of the nationalist Maud Gonne formed the major basis of his second phase of writing style which became less lilting and incantatory as seen in *In the Seven Woods* (1903), *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910), *Poems: Written in Disappointment* (1913), and *Responsibilities: Poems and a Play* (1914).

An experiment with automatic writing eventually produced the system of mystical symbols elaborated in *A Vision* (1925), which articulate many of the poems in collections such as *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *Seven Poems and a Fragment* (1922), *The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems* (1924), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stairs and Other Poems* (1933).



LET US KNOW

Yeats was greatly impressed by the poems of Rabindranath Tagore and was largely instrumental in getting the *Gitanjali* translated into English and published in England. He contributed an appreciative introduction to the English edition of *Gitanjali*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1. Name the major influences on Yeats as a poet?

Q.2. Which part of Yeats's life will be important for the study of the given poem?

Q.3. Which collection of his poetry contains the poem "An Irish Man Foresees His Death"*?*

5.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM



Meet my fate : I shall be killed in action.

Fight, Guard : Here it refers to Airman of the defence services.

"An Irishman Foresees His Death"

I Know that I shall ***meet my fate***
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I ***fight*** I do not hate
Those that I ***guard*** I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public man, nor ***cheering crowds***,
A lonely ***impulse*** of delight
Drove to this ***tumult***in the clouds;
I balanced all, ***brought all to mind***,
The years to come seemed ***waste of breath***,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.



Cheering crowds : crowds of people who applaud.

Impulse : sudden inclination to act without thinking about results.

Tumult : disturbance caused by battle.

Brought all to mind : considered everything.

Waste of breath: useless.

5.4.1 Context of the Poem

This is rather a thought-provoking poem on Major Robert Gregory, who was the son of one of Yeats's friends. Robert Gregory was killed in Italy during the First World War in 1918. The poem was written during the First World War (1914-1919) when many Irish men fought for the cause of Englishmen. The poem is taken from the collection *The Wild Swans At Coole*. During the first World War, Ireland was a part of "Great Britian". It became a separate nation later in1922. Therefore, when Gregory died, he actually died for the "English", not for the "Irish". The pilot sees his forthcoming death yet he does not seem regretful or scared, but rather accepts the fate he is going to encounter.

5.4.2 Explanation of the Poem

This poem captures the mind of an airman confronting death. This insight is what makes the poem memorable. This poem is about an Irish pilot fighting in the war and anticipating his imminent death. He is prepared to die after reflecting on his life. He realises that it has been a waste of time. This is reflected in the line, "A waste of breath the years behind / In balance with this life, this death." (Yeats).

It was the life of adventure that prompted the Irish airman to fight. He was totally disgusted with the monotony of daily life and he sought the thrill of the Air Force. He explicitly states that it was not under any obligation for the country nor the inspiring speeches of the leaders or the cheering of the crowds that provoked him to fight in the battlefield. It was simply the thrill of the battlefield or adventure that pushed him to take up the job of an ***Airman***.



Airman : pilot or member of an aircraft crew, especially in an airforce.
Kiltartan'sCross : a name typical of Irish villages. The Kiltartan Cross was a group of Roman Catholics that were directly related to the Air Force.

Its must be noted that being an Irish-man Robert Gregory did not have any deep love for England. His country is ***Kiltartan's Cross***, his countrymen "Kiltartan's poor". He says that whatever is the outcome in the war it will make their lives no worse or better than before the war began. The airman lists every factor weighing upon his situation and his vision of death. He rejects every possible factor he believes to be false: he does not hate or love his enemies or his allies, his country will neither be benefited nor hurt by any outcome of the war. He does not fight for political or moral motives but because of his "impulse of delight". His past life seems a waste, while his future life promises to be the same and his death will balance out his life. He feels that only death in war can balance his life of dullness.

Don't you think that the expression, "A lonely impulse of delight / Drove to this tumult in the clouds"contains the entire perception of W. B. Yeats? Don't you think that this poem is inspiring and can rouse plenty of its readers from lethargy? It can serve as the stimulus or incentive to take up a life of adventure.



LET US KNOW

We can draw a similarity between "An Irish man Foresees his Death"and "The Wrecker Driver Foresees Your Death," by David Baker in the sense that it readily hints at the foreshadowing of death. Baker uses the second-person pronoun "you" to warn his readers as well as the poem's reflective speaker, active speaker, reminding all of us of our mortality :

Looking at the rows of cars wrinkled
like wads of paper,
windshields webbed with cracks,
oil still oozing from the fresh ones
hauled in the night before, ……

("The Wrecker Driver Foresees Your Death" by David Baker)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4. Explain the importance of the lines "Those That I fight I do not Hate / Those that I guard I do not love".

Q.5. Explain what the poet mean by 'A lonely impulse of delight/ Drove to this tumult in the clouds'.

Q.6. Fill in the blanks :

Nor ....., Nor .....bade me fight,
Nor ....., Nor .....cheering .....
A .....impulse of .....
Drove to this .....in the clouds.



ACTIVITY 5.1

1. Imagine yourself as an airman fighting for your country and express your patriotic feelings in a few sentences.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.7. "I know that I shall meet my fate?'' What is the "fate" he will meet? Is it going to be death with honour?

Q.8. Explain the metaphor "Drove to this tumult in the clouds."

Q.9. Explain :

a) "Cheering crowds"

b) "impulse"

c) "tumult"

Q.10. Why does he call the impulse, an "impulse of delight"? What does "delight" imply here?



ACTIVITY 5.2

1. Can you think of some other poem where a first person voice is used?

5.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The language of Yeats's poetry is plain and has the simplicity of everyday speech. He expresses ideas briefly and sharply. The language of the poem is simple and suggestive. The poem is recited in first person which makes the poem more interesting to read. The poem is written in a colloquial, pointed, ***epigrammatic*** and conversational style. This short sixteen-line poem has a very simple structure: lines are metered in ***iambic tetrameter***, and four grouped ***quatrains*** of alternating rhymes: *ababcdcdefefghgh.* Words were chosen carefully to fit the rhyme scheme and to make it more interesting to the reader. The simple form of the poem reflects the simple theme of the poem.



Epigrammatic : concise and wetly.
Iambic tetrameter : unstressed syllable followed a stressed syllable with four feet.
Quatrains : A stanza of four lines, rhymed or unrhymed.

You have already learnt the poem "When You Are Old" by Yeats. By now you must have understood how the poet employs some poetic techniques. In this poem he uses metaphor to make contrasts and comparisons. The metaphor "Drove to this tumult in the clouds". (Yeats)

explains that the speaker had reached the zenith of his flight as well as the zenith of his life. From here he will encounter his death.

Another example of a ***metaphor*** presented in this poem is "A waste of breath the years behind." (Yeats). This is a metaphor which compares the years that have passed and how they were a waste of time. An example of ***irony*** found in the poem is when he says he does not love or want to protect the people of his country, yet when people go to war they usually fight for the honour of their country. Don't you think that the title of the poem is suggestive? The title of the poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" reflects the fact that the airman foresaw his impending death. This is significant because it reflects the fate of many people fighting on the war-front anticipating their death.



Metaphor : a figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that it doesnot literally denote in order to suggest a similarity.
Irony : the use of words that say the opposite of what you really mean.

You can see that this poem is recited in first-person. The poet is recounting the thoughts that are going through his mind as his death approaches. This choice of voice i.e. "active voice" is important because it gives an insight into the thoughts of the airman fighting on the verge of death. It is the poet who is imagining these thoughts. As he does so he brings up related ideas and questions.



LET US KNOW

English is a language of stresses i.e. stress-timed rhythm, which means that the stress syllables come at approximately equal intervals of time, regardless of the number of the intervening unstressed syllables. Metre is the term used to indicate the number of stressed syllables that form beats (or feet) and the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line of a poem. Most of English poetry is written in this metre and to comprehend metrical patterns it is important to enjoy poetry .Lets take a sentence like

"A Change of air would do you good"

u / u / u / u /

This kind of rhythm is called iambic metre.

IGNOU BOOKLET–BEGE-101

(From Language to Literature –Literary Devices)

And

Marjorie Boulton's*The Anatomy of Poetry*

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Q.11. The poem is written in a .....style (tick the most appropriate one)

a) complex b) pointed c) musical

Q.12. Can you find out which syllables are stressed in : "A waste of breath the years behind"?

Q.13. What are the main thoughts of the speaker in the lines "A waste of breath the years behind".



5.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that W. B. Yeats was one of the greatest modern English poets. He can truly be regarded as the poet of the Irish literary revival. "An Irish Airman Foresees Death" inspires readers to wake up from lethargy and move towards an exciting and meaningful life. It also looks at some basic human situations and experiences of life. You then learn about the poetic techniques employed by the poet and also about the style and language. You should now be able to illustrate, explain and appreciate W. B. Yeats' poetry in general and the poem in particular effectively.



5.7 FURTHER READING

1) *IGNOU. Understanding Poetry.IGNOU : New Delhi*, *1991.*

2) Larrisy, Edward (1998). *W. B. Yeats. Tavistock North Cote House.*

4) Poduri Dattatreya (2000). *W. B. Yeats Poet and Dramatist*. Jaipur Pointer Publisher.

4) Singh, M. P. (2003). *W. B. Yeats : His Poetry and Politics New Delhi Atlantic*



5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Intellectual side of personality (father), emotional instincts (mother), beauty of the magical contryside in Ireland with his grand parents shaped his early expression

Ans to Q No 2: Refer to 5.3.1 His Life 5.3.2 His Works

Ans to Q No 3:*TheWild Swans at Coole*

Ans to Q No 4: Refer to 5.4.2 Explanation of the Poem.

Ans to Q No 5: Refer to 5.4.2 Explanation of the Poem.

Ans to Q No 6: Law, duty, public man, cheering crowds, lonely, delight, tumult.

Ans to Q No 7: Refer to 5.4.2 Explanation of the Poem and 5.5 Style and Language.

Ans to Q No 8: Refer to 5.5 Style and Language.

Ans to Q No 9: Cheering Crowds : crowds of people who applaud

Impulse : sudden inclination to act without thinking about results.

Tumult : Disturbance caused by battle

Ans to Q No 10: Refer to 5.4.2 Explanation of the Poem.

Ans to Q No 11: (b) Pointed

Ans to Q No 12: Refer to 5.5 Style and Language

Ans to Q No 13: A metaphor which compares the years that have passed and how they were a waste of time (to elaborate.)



5.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Write in about 100 words the substance of the poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death".

Q.2. Discuss the life and works of W.B. Yeats.

Q.3. Discuss the style and language employed by the poet in this poem.

Q.4. Name in the light of the poem, some of the reasons that may force a man to fight?

Q.5. Comment on the feelings of the airman for the cause of his fighting?

Q.6. Comment on the greatness of W. B. Yeats as a modern poet.

Q7. Explain with reference to the context:

a) My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before

b) "A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds"

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