UNIT 4: W.B. YEATS: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 W.B. Yeats : The Poet

4.3.1 His Life

4.3.2 His Works

4.4 Let us Sum up

4.5 Further Reading

4.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.7 Model Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the life and works of the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats
- gain an idea on the concept of modernism

4.2 INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939) was an Irish poet and dramatist and is considered one of the most important figures of 20th century literature. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923 and was the first Irishman to be honoured with the prize. Yeats being a modern poet, has to be read with reference to the movement.

In Literature, modernism was marked by sudden and unexpected breaks with traditional ways of dallying with the world. Works became more experimental and individualistic- something that would have been frowned upon a decade or two ago. Importance began to be given to the inner self and

consciousness (Psychology as a growing science and Freud's rising popularity might have contributed to this). Nature took a backseat and the physical surroundings of man was worthy of attention to the writers and poets of that time only so far as it affected the psyche of the individual. The First World War did much to alter the rose-tinted view that artists might have had of the world. Just as the familiar social, economic and political structures that Victorian England was used to, broke down with the onset of the War, so was it with poetry that the lyrical, flowery and nature-loving imagery of the Romantics and Victorians gave way to the growing significance of Imagism. Shorter in length and written in free verse, Imagist poetry with its minimalist language and lesser structural rigidity stood in stark contrast to the sentimentality of Romantic poetry and its preoccupation with beauty. William Butler Yeats too rode on this wave of change. Beginning his literary career with poems drawn from Irish folklore, he gradually moved to more contemporary political themes. For this he was indebted to Ezra Pound– one of the pioneers of Imagism. Abandoning the conventional poetic diction of his earlier work, he went on to write verse that was less ornate and more concise and direct in style and content.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. In which year was W. B. Yeats awarded the Nobel Prize?

Q2. How did the World War affect poetry?

Q3. Mention one writer who influenced W. B. Yeats.

4.3 W.B. YEATS: THE POET

Let us now move on to the discussion of the life and works of one of the famous modern poets, W.B. Yeats.

4.3.1 His Life

W.B. Yeats was born in County Dublin on June 13, 1865. His father trained as a lawyer and later pursued a career as an artist due to which he moved with his family to London at a young age, but he spent summers in

County Sligo, in Western Ireland. This was his mother's home and this place held an important place throughout his life and he claimed this place to be his "home of the heart". His family moved back to Dublin when Yeats was about sixteen years old and here he attended the Metropolitan School of Art.

Yeats developed an interest in the occult and mysticism at an early age. He associated himself with a famous theosophist, Madame Blatavsky, and joined a Theosophy Society. Theosophy holds that all beliefs make up a larger system of religions, and all hold some measure of the truth. Yeats attended many **séances**, starting from the year, 1886.

In 1889, Yeats met an Irish revolutionary named Maude Gonne (1866-1953) who was to play a very important part in his life. Yeats fell in love with her and most of his poetry was addressed to her throughout his life. Unfortunately, Maude did not return his feelings, and after refusing his marriage proposals three times, she married Major John MacBride in 1903 who is mentioned in the poem "Easter 1916" as discussed in the next unit. Collections of poetry from this time include *The Rose* (1893) and "The Wind Among the Reeds" (1899).



Séances: a meeting of spiritualists

4.3.2 His Works

Yeats' first work was published in the Dublin University Review in 1885 and *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Works,* which is considered his first major work, came out in 1893. Yeats' early poetry focuses on ancient Irish epics as well as the contemporary nationalist movement that was gaining force in Ireland.

Yeats was fascinated by folktales and by Irish folk history and under the guidance of George Russell and Thomas Hyde, he published *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry* in 1888. In 1897, Yeats met Lady Gregory and she convinced him to start writing drama with Irish subject matter. Together with George Moore and Edward Martyn, the two set up The Abbey Theatre, Ireland's national theater, in Dublin in 1904. Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a

nationalist play personifying Ireland as a woman, was performed on the opening night.

In 1917, Yeats bought Thoor Ballylee, a Norman stone tower in County Sligo, near Coole Park. Characteristically, the poet chose to live inside his symbol. He spent the following summer with Maude Gonne's family, and proposed to her daughter, Iseult, but was turned down. The same year, he married Georgie Hyde-Lee. His wife shared his interest in the occult and claimed a gift of "automatic writing," in which her hand was directed by a divine force. Together, the two produced *The Vision*, a notebook of spiritual thoughts, in 1933.

While writing poetry and plays, as well as, continuing to serve on the artistic board of the Abbey Theatre, Yeats became a member of the Seanad, the Irish senate, from 1922-25. He served on the committees that helped to create coinage for the new state. He left in disgust when the governmental organization was split in the aftermath of the Irish Civil War (1923-24).

As Yeats grew older, he developed a friendship with Ezra Pound, a poet who drew him away from his mystical, lyrical style into something drier and sparer. Arguably his most famous collection, *The Tower* (1928) contains political poems, as well as, a more modernist return to mythological topics like "Leda and the Swan." Yeats became increasingly political in his old age, publishing a collection called *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921, which includes his famous "Easter, 1916" in which he describes the birth of modern Irish nationalism with the famous phrase, "a terrible beauty is born." *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) contain poems that focus on Yeats' own estate at Coole Park—the winding stair being the stair at Thoor Ballylee. His later poems, especially "Under Ben Bulben," express his desire to be buried there. After his death, he was buried in Sligo. His epitaph reads "Cast a cold eye on life, on death; horsemen, pass by!"



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Name the place that was close to William Butler's heart.

Q5. What is Theosophy?

Q6. Who was Maude Gonne?

Q7. Name Yeats' first major work.

Q8. Who were the founders of the Abbey Theatre?

Q9. What is automatic writing?

Q10. In which collection of poetry does "Easter, 1916" appear?



4.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the poet William Butler Yeats and his contribution in the literature of the twentieth century. Being a poet, he mainly draws his themes from Irish folklore. You have come to know that he was influenced by mysticism and occult and his poetry reflects his interests. However, we cannot forget Yeats' contribution as a dramatist who went on to be one the founders of the Abbey Theatre. It has to be remembered that much of Yeats' early poetry bloomed out of his unrequited love for Maude Gonne whereas his later poems show him as a man who is keen on writing political poems.



4.5 FURTHER READING

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

2. Larrisy, Edward. (1998) *W. B. Yeats*. United Kingdom: NorthCote House.

3. Singh, M. P. (2003) *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Politics.* Atlantic: U.K.



4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1 : He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923.

Ans to Q2 : With the onset of the War, poetry gave way to the growing signifance of Imagism. Shorter in length and written in free verse, Imagist poetry with its minimalist language and lesser structural rigidity stood in stark contrast to the sentimentality of Romantic poetry with its preoccupation with beauty.

Ans to Q3 : Ezra Pound.

Ans to Q4 : His mother's home was in County Sligo, in Western Ireland and this place held an important place throughout his life and he claimed this place to be his "home of the heart".

Ans to Q5 : Theosophy holds that all beliefs make up a larger system of religions, and all hold some measure of the truth.

Ans to Q6 : Maude Gonne was an Irish revolutionary who was to play a very important part in Yeats' life. Yeats fell in love with her and most of his poetry was addressed to her throughout his life.

Ans to Q7 : *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Works* is considered his first major work and it came out in 1893.

Ans to Q8 : Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats, George Moore and Edward Martyn set up The Abbey Theatre, Ireland's national theatre, in Dublin in 1904.

Ans to Q9 : "Automatic writing," is considered as a form of writing that is directed by a divine force.

Ans to Q10 : *Michael Robartes and the Dancer.*



4.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write a short note on modernism.

Q2. Discuss William Butler Yeats as a modern poet.

Q3. Describe in brief the influence of Irish folk culture in Yeats' poetry.

Q4. Write a short note on the poetic output of William Butler Yeats.

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