UNIT 15: W.B YEATS: SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit you will be able to:

- discuss W.B Yeats, one of the major modern poets
- describe the ways in which Yeats used Irish Folklore as the context for his early poems
- explain the poem "Sailing to Byzantium"
- highlight the emergence of Yeats as a poet and thinker can be termed as the pioneer of Celtic revival in Ireland

15.2 INRODUCTION

The final unit of the course takes up one of the widely anthologised poems of W.B. Yeats titled "Sailing to Byzantium" which captures the imagination of the readers with its interesting narrative.

15.3 ST. COLERIDGE: THE POET

Before we explore the poem let us gain a brief idea on the life and works of W.B. Yeats.

15.3.1 His Life

W.B Yeats was born on June 13, 1865 in Sandymount, a seaside suburb of Dublin. The family of Yeats's father was mercantile settlers. He spent his childhood alternately in London and Sligo.The first three years of infancy were passed in his birthplace Dublin. But in 1868, the family moved to London so that his father could study to become a professional painter. The family then settled at 23 Fitzory Road, Regent's park and lived there until 1874.

Sligo, not London, was the original home for all the children of John Butler Yeats. For W.B Yeats, the human being who first occupied a special place in his mind was not his father or mother, but grandfather William Pollexfen of Sligo, the silent and fierce old man, as Yeats describes in his poem -“In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen.” Yeats died of heart failure on 28th January and buried in accordance with the wishes expressed by him in 'Under Ben Bulben' with the inscription: "Cast a cold eye on life, on death. Horseman, pass by."

15.3.2 His Works

At the age of seventeen, Yeats first began to write verses. Although Yeats wanted to be an artist, but he continued to write poetry mostly on romantic subjects in the manner of Shelley. In 1885, Yeats verse appeared for the first time in 'Dublin University Review'. Many of his early ballads reappeared in 'The Wanderings of Oisin and other poems'. In 1887, his verse was published in England for the first time, when his 'The Madness of King Groll', appeared in the magazine 'The Leisure Hour'. In the same year, he edited an anthology of poetry, which was published in Dublin under

the title *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*.

In 1888, he compiled a volume entitled Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry, which was published in London. Thus, gradually Yeats popularity began to grow wider. He was beginning to be accepted by the public as an authority on Irish folklore and a poet of importance.

In his grandfather's house, in 1888, Yeats completed a long poem on a theme from Irish legend: "The Wandering of Oisin' and other poems'. The lyrics and ballads contained in this first published book of verse -were in due course reprinted under the title *Crossways*.

Yeats, in his Memoirs, wrote: "I was twenty three years old when the troubling of my life began. I had heard from time to time in letters from Miss O'Leary's old sister, of a beautiful girl who had left the society of the Vice-regal Court for Dublin Nationalism. In after years, I persuaded myself that I felt premonitory excitement at the first reading of her name. Presently, she drove up to our house in Bedford Park with an introduction from O'Leary to my father. I had never thought to see in a living woman such beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past."

Of course, Maud Gonne became his chief interest. From the moment of their meeting all life for Yeats was changed, changed utterly. But, Maud Gonne did not respond to his passion. She accepted him with delight as a friend and she was obsessed by a burning desire to free Ireland from its seven hundred years's dominion by England.

In 1891, the Rhymer's club was formed and in that year also, Yeats founded, in London, the Irish Literary Society. During that year, he returned to Ireland on a visit, in the course of which he asked Maud Gonne to marry him. She refused but begged him for his friendship. Obsessed by her thought, he wrote in that year a play - *The Countess Catheleen*, whose heroine was no one but Maud Gonne. The theme of the play was that Cathleen is a beautiful noble

woman who, having sold her soul to the Devil so that her people may be saved from starvation, eventually goes to Heaven.

In 1894, Yeats wrote play, '*The Land of Heart's Desire*. In 1899, Yeats's third volume of verse, "*The Wind Among the Reeds*" appeared. For a long time, it was widely believed that all the love-poems in this book, and in the books which followed it, was addressed to Maud Gonne. Yet there are some poems, which point to another woman, perhaps to more than one. There was a beautiful dark woman to whom Yeats refers in his unpublished autobiography, by the name 'Diana Vernon.'

In 1908 Yeats's collected Works in verse and prose was published in eight volumes. Then in 1910, Yeats's another new volume *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* was published. In this work, Yeats had changed his style of writing his verse. John Unterecker in his book *A Reader's Guide to W.B Yeats* said- The romantic wistfulness, the dreamy decorative quality of much of his earlier verse now gave way to a manner at once more terse, astringent and masculine, which becomes apparent in this volume." This trend is evident in his next volume *Responsibilitie* (1914). In 1919, Yeats's new collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* was published.

From the time of the Easter Rising of 1916 up to the Civil War of 1922, Yeats was more affected by public events. His violent romance was replaced then by the bitter realities and that can be ascertained from his *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), which reflected the clashes of those events. *On Easter Monday* 1916 the Irish rose in rebellion against the English, and between 1916 and 1921 they fought the English in a guerrilla war. Even after 1921, rival Irish factions fought a civil war about whether to accept the peace Treaty which gave independence to the Irish Free state but separated it from the six counties known as Northern island.

In 1918, Yeats published a volume of essays on mystical subjects, *Per Amica Silentia Luna*, which showed his interest in the

hidden world and mystical things. In 1922, Yeats became Senator of the Irish Free State and during that period, he delivered several important lectures in Senate. But, before publishing Yeats's most powerful verse collection *The Tower*, Yeats wrote another verse collection *A Woman Young and Old*, and all these poems were written during 1926 or 1927. In 1923, the King of Sweden awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, which was presented to him and two years later, he published his appreciation in a short work -*The Bounty of Sweden*. In 1925, Yeats published his A Vision. It is an elaborate book on prose and it records Yeats's astrological, mystical and historical theories. In 1926, Yeats made a translation of Sophocles' Oedipus the King. Yeats presented it at Abbey Theatre. In the same year he wrote a book or a long essay on the death of *Synge* entitled *The Death of Synge* and other passages from an old diary.

In 1927, Yeats's *The Winding Stair* appeared and in 1928, he completed his other prose work, *A Packet for Ezra Pound*. In 1930, Yeats wrote a play entitled *The Words Upon a Window Pan* and in 1933, his new of collection of poems *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* and a new edition of his *Collected Poems* were published and in 1934, his *Collected Plays* appeared. In 1938, Yeats wrote *Purgatory*, a one Act Play and on 28th January, 1939, Yeats died of heart failure.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few lines on the early life of W.B. Yeats.

Q2. When did Yeats first begin to write verses?

Q3. Who was Maud Gonne? How did she respond to Yeats' interest in her?

Q4. How was Yeats affected by some of the contemporary public events of his time?

15.4 CONTEXT AND EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

The poem was written in the autumn of 1926. Yeats's knowledge of the city was largely derived from his reading of W.G. Holmes, *The Age of Justinian and Theodora* (1905). Byzantium is a holy city, as the capital of eastern Christianity and as the place where God exists because of the life after death Yeats imagines existing there. His description of Byzantium shows that he valued the position of the artist in the city. The ancient city of Byzantium was remarkable for the beauty of its buildings and the art of its craftsman. Yeats's city is both historical and ideal. It is a symbol of holiness, of perfection of art, of the world of intellect and spirit as distinct from the world of senses. The poem celebrates the permanence of art against the transitory nature. Byzantium has become for him a Utopia, a symbol of holiness, of perfect craftsmanship and of Ireland's future achievement in the arts.

Stanza I

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
--Those dying generations -at their songs,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect.

According to the poet, Ireland is a land for young, imaginative artists, where the old men have no place at all. The young are engaged in their creative pursuits, whereas the old men continue their songs of their golden days of youth. Thus, one theme of the poem is the difference between youth and old age. Thus, the country is no more a place for old men. That is the country, the Ireland of his youth and he is going to leave in search of a place with regret. The imagery 'the salmon falls' refers to Yeats' reminiscence of Sligo. The river drops down through the town in a series of falls up which the salmon leap in the spring when returning to spawn.

Salmon are symbols of strength and beauty. The young man is caught up in the sensual music as surely as fish are caught up in a net. But the poet is determined to go in search of a perfect place fit for his soul and mind though his body is deteriorating.

Stanza II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium

Yeats is sad and desperate at the innumerable problems of old age which affect man's capacity to live life pleasurably and fruitfully. Old age is insignificant like 'A tattered coat upon a stick'. It is as hollow as a scarecrow, with the physical appearance of a human being but lacking the human essence.

Though his body is deteriorating with old age, he is resolved to find compensation by achieving a new perfection of the soul. His soul must clap its hands for joy as it realises it is approaching nearer to perfection. The soul must also sing -an idea which combines the ideas of singing for joy and of writing poetry. To teach his soul to sing he must, metaphorically, sail to Byzantium. The only way in which the soul can learn to sing is by studying monuments of its own magnificence such as Byzantium art. The old men must look at old age as the liberation of the soul which actively experiences the beauty beyond one's immediate perception. Yeats, so, resolves to sail for Byzantium.

Stanza III

O Sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold masaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Yeats refers to the sages in the frieze at St.Appolinaire at Ravenna and invokes them to spiral down the cone to him. A Perne is the spool or bobbin on which the thread is spun. The Perne carried the thread of human life which is unwound within the gyre in the opposite direction to the movement of the gyre. Perne also means a kind of hawk and the image of a bird is like the descent by the sages. It is convincingly linked with the golden bird of the last stanza. By the image 'perne in a gyre',Yeats refers to successive ages as a system of gyres.

In the world of art, an image is as holy as a sage. God, is the supreme artist and is the artificer of eternity and the holy fire, like the poet with his imagination which makes all artifices.

Stanza 1V

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmith make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake:
Or set upon a golden bough of Byzantium
Of what is past or passing, or to come.

Yeats seems to refer indirectly to Hans Anderson's tale "The Emperor's Nightingale" in which reference has been made to the Emperor's palace at Byzantium where there was a tree made of gold and silver and artificial birds that sang. On the other hand, it is also possible that Yeats may have had in mind "Ode to a Nightingale" written by Keats, where the latter had referred to 'the self same song heard in ancient days by Emperor and Clown.' The poet, if he is born again, wants to take his form from the artist's imagination so that he would be able to defy the transitory quality of all natural things. As an artifice he would become immortal and sing of what is past or passing or to come rather than to follow the course taken

by fish, flesh and fowl of birth and decay. Thus, by imprisoning his thought in a system, he gained a strong belief that he knew and understood - "What is past, or passing, or to come."

Thus, the poem, published in 1928, expresses Yeats's desire for eternity. Byzantium's civilisation is 'elaborately rich', but represent the perfection of the spirit as opposed to nature. He desires to escape from his own time -a period of confusion and disintegration.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Why is the poet sad and desperate in the poem "Sailing to Byzantium"?

Q6. What is the only way that the soul can learn to sing according to the poet?

Q7. What are the indirect references to other texts that Yeats likely makes in his poem?

15.5 POETIC STYLE

In Yeat's poetry, one can notice the use of symbols and myth. In Essay,Yeats describes symbols as 'the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half consciously by their successors, the poet, the musician, and the artist. But, Yeats uses both the symbolism of sounds and ideas. His poetry, in this connection is a communication with spirits, with an unseen order of things.

Yeats's view of Byzantium is given in his work *A Vision*. "I think that if I could be given a month of antiquity or leave to spend it when I choose, and i would spend it in Byzantium." This poem is representation of the combination and unification of the subjective and objective man, which is in reality impossible to achieve. Symbols and images becomes more subjective in Byzantium. His aim here is to achieve a unity in being -where subjectivity and objectivity become one.



15.6 LET US SUM UP

After having read through the unit the learner will be able to discuss W.B Yeats, one of the major modern poets and appreciate his literary contributions. The learner will be able to grasp and explain the content of the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" and describe the ways in which Yeats used Irish Folklore as the context for his early poems. Together with the poetic style and language of the poem, you will be able to appreciate the literary imagination that Yeats pours into his poetical narratives or his refined poetry.



15.7 FURTHER READING

1) Yeats, W.B. (2018) *The Poetry of W.B. yeats.* London: Arcturus Publishing Limited.



15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: W.B Yeats was born on June 13, 1865 in Sandymount, a seaside suburb of Dublin. The family of Yeats's father was mercantile settlers. He spent his childhood alternately in London and Sligo.The first three years of infancy were passed in his birthplace Dublin. But in 1868, the family moved to London so that his father could study to become a professional painter. The family then settled at 23 Fitzory Road, Regent's park and lived there until 1874.

Ans to Q2: At the age of seventeen, Yeats first began to write verses. Although Yeats wanted to be an artist, but he continued to write poetry mostly on romantic subjects in the manner of Shelley. In 1885, Yeats verse appeared for the first time in *Dublin University Review*. Many of his early ballads reappeared in *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*. In 1887, his verse was published in England for the first time, when his *The Madness of King Groll*, appeared in the magazine *The Leisure Hour*. In the same year, he edited an anthology of poetry, which was published in

Dublin under the title *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*.

Ans to Q3: Maud Gonne became his chief interest. From the moment of their meeting all life for Yeats was changed, changed utterly. But, Maud Gonne did not respond to his passion. She accepted him with delight as a friend and she was obsessed by a burning desire to free Ireland from its seven hundred years's dominion by England.

Ans to Q4: From the time of the Easter Rising of 1916 up to the Civil War of 1922, Yeats was more affected by public events. His violent romance was replaced then by the bitter realities and that can be ascertained from his *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), which reflected the clashes of those events. On Easter Monday 1916 the Irish rose in rebellion against the English, and between 1916 and 1921 they fought the English in a guerrilla war. Even after 1921, rival Irish factions fought a civil war about whether to accept the peace Treaty which gave independence to the Irish Free state but separated it from the six counties known as Northern island.

Ans to Q5: He is sad and desperate at the innumerable problems of old age which affect man's capacity to live life pleasurably and fruitfully. Old age is insignificant like “A tattered coat upon a stick”. It is as hollow as a scarecrow, with the physical appearance of a human being but lacking the human essence. Though his body is deteriorating with old age, he is resolved to find compensation by achieving a new perfection of the soul. His soul must clap its hands for joy as it realises it is approaching nearer to perfection. The soul must also sing -an idea which combines the ideas of singing for joy and of writing poetry. To teach his soul to sing he must, metaphorically, sail to Byzantium.

Ans to Q6: The only way in which the soul can learn to sing is by studying monuments of its own magnificence such as Byzantium art. The old men must look at old age as the liberation of the soul which actively experiences the beauty beyond one's immediate perception. Yeats, so, resolves to sail for Byzantium.

Ans to Q7: Yeats seems to refer indirectly to Hans Anderson's tale "The Emperor's Nightingale" in which reference has been made to the Emperor's palace at Byzantium where there was a tree made of gold and silver and artificial birds that sang. On the other hand, it is also

possible that Yeats may have had in mind "Ode to a Nightingale" written by Keats, where the latter had referred to 'the self same song heard in ancient days by Emperor and Clown.' The poet, if he is born again, wants to take his form from the artist's imagination so that he would be able to defy the transitory quality of all natural things.



15.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write a short note on the life and works of W.B. Yeats

Q2. Explain the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" in your own words.

Q3. Discuss the poetic style of W.B. Yeats with reference to the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" from your own reading of the poem.

Q4. Explain with reference to context:

a) "That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
--Those dying generations -at their songs,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect.

b) "O Sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold masaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity"

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