Paper 4, Module 18: Text

Role	Name	Affiliation
Principal Investigator	Prof. Tutun Mukherjee	University of Hyderabad
Paper Coordinator	Prof. Hariharan Balagovindan	Institute of English, University of Kerala
Content Writer/Author (CW)	Dr. Anjana Sankar,	Sree Sankara College, Kalady
Content Reviewer (CR)	Dr. Jameela Begum	Former Head & Professor, Institute of English, University of Kerala
Language Editor (LE)	Prof. Hariharan Balagovindan	Institute of English, University of Kerala

W. B. Yeats

1. Life and Influences

A remarkable career that spans forty years commencing with the last two decades of the nineteenth century , and extending well into twentieth century till the outbreak of the Second World War, Yeats's poetic career acts as a bridge between romantic and modern poetry. Foremost among Irish English poets, Yeats was born on June 13, 1865 in Dublin as the eldest son of John Butler Yeats, a lawyer-turned –painter and Susan Pollexfen, a member of a well-to-do family in Sligo, in the west of Ireland. He spent his early years between London and Sligo, due to the impractical nature of his father regarding money, forcing Yeats to grow up in a general atmosphere of poverty. Like many other Irish writers, despite having affluent relatives, Yeats was forced to lead an impoverished existence.

1.1 Education and Early Influences

After completing school, Yeats chose to study Art in The Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, where he met George Russell, which shaped his interest in mysticism and the supernatural. Similar meetings with William Morris and John O'Leary awakened an interest in cultural nationalism. Yeats's interest in painting waned yet the two abiding interests that took shape during this time stayed with him throughout his life, shaping his poetry and outlook towards life, namely his interest in magic and the psychic, and his involvement in the Irish Nationalist Movement

1.1.2 The Influence of French Symbolism

Through Arthur Symons, Yeats discovered French Symbolism and in 1896, he met French Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine and the Irish dramatist, J. M .Synge in Paris. Yeats's use of complex symbols in his poems is a direct influence of the French Symbolist poets. Norman Jeffares, a noted Yeats Scholar has commented on this aspect. Symbolist Movement which originated in nineteenth century French poetry with Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme and Valery, exploited the mysterious suggestiveness of private symbols. These poets focused on achieving a musical quality in their verse and believed that through blurring the senses and mixing images, they could represent a higher reality. Apart from Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound also were deeply influenced by the French Movement.

1.1.3 The Celtic Twilight

Yeats soon became a leading member of the Irish literary Revival of the 1880s, a direct outcome of the resurgence of the Irish Nationalism in the campaign for Home Rule.Yeats was drawn towards Irish nationalism and translations of Irish writing into English by John O'Leary which gave Yeats a new sense of direction and subject matter in poetry. The places, stories and supernatural beliefs he came across in Sligo, as well as Ireland's ancient legends and largely forgotten intellectual heritage found expression in Yeats's poetry. *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) was the first outcome of this interest. In 1891, following the death of the leader of the Irish National Party, Parnell, whose involvement in a divorce case had split the party, there was a lull in Irish politics and Yeats felt that the time was apt for launching a literary movement. He formed Irish Literary societies in Dublin and London. *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), the title he gave to his collections of stories and poems epitomized the romance and mysticism of Celtic culture. *The Wind among the*

*Reeds(*1899)marks the crowning glory of his 'Celtic' poetry, where the bleakly beautiful landscape in and around Sligo blends in a mysterious, vague and beautiful manner.

1.1.4. Mysticism and the Occult

Yeats developed a deep interest in the occult, which began with his study of Theosophy as a young man and this developed when he joined the Theosophists, a school of thought that was advocated by Madame Blavatsky who believed that knowledge of God could be attained through spiritual ecstasy and direct intuition . But he was asked to leave when he demanded evidence and later became interested in different kinds of unorthodox thought: Buddhism, magic, spiritualism, astrology , the Cabbala. The reference to "Spiritus Mundi" in "The Second Coming" and Byzantium, which is a poetic image of integrated art in "Sailing to Byzantium" whereby death is transformed into a state of immortality, and "The Magi"- all point towards a rejection of Christianity in favour of a more esoteric view of art, history, politics and love .

1.2 Biographical influence on poetry

Yeats has dealt with highly personal and subjective experiences and emotions in his poetry. It is indeed difficult to arrive at a true understanding of his poems without becoming familiar with the real life characters who throng his poems either directly or in the form of archetypal symbols and mythological characters.

1.2.1 Yeats and Maud Gonne

The year 1889 was very significant in Yeats's life as his earliest verse, *The Wanderings of Oisin*, a mixture of Romanticism, nationalist idealism, Irish mythology and mysticism was published. It was during the very same year that he met Maud Gonne (1866-1953),

tall and beautiful, a well-to-do revolutionary with whom he fell in love. Being penniless Yeats could only offer her poetic devotion and wrote the play *The Countless Kathleen*for her.In 1891, he proposed to her but was refused in words that have become famous since, for the same words were repeated by Maud Gonne on many similar occasions to Yeats- that the world would thank her for not marrying him, that they should continue to be friends and he should go on writing beautiful poems for her. Yeats's obsession with the fiery and beautiful Republican Maud Gonne, haunted his works for long which mirror the bitterness he felt at her continued refusal to marry him. Poems like "When you are old" and 'The Fish"which he wrote to or for her, were rather abstract due to reasons of poetic style and personal discretion. Maud Gonne's marriage to John MacBride in 1903, which ended in a separation two years later, is hinted at many of Yeats's poems like "Easter 1916" and "A Prayer for My Daughter".

1.2.2 Lady Gregory and the Abbey Theatre

A major change in Yeats's life took place in 1894 when he met Lady Gregory in London. Yeats first visited her in Ireland in 1896 and from 1897, started to spend his summers at Coole Park, her house in County Galway. It provided Yeats with an ordered peaceful existence and an opportunity to meet and interact with other writers like George Russell, whose penname was AE, George Bernard Shaw and George Moore. With the help of Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge and Sean O' Casey, Yeats established Abbey theatre in Dublin in 1904. Yeats was its manager from its inception in 1904 until 1910. It was a hard task as several objections were raised to the plays staged there -- Yeats's *The Countless Kathleen* on religious grounds and Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* on puritanical, nationalist grounds.

1.2.3 Marriage and Family

Yeats's marriage to Georgie Hyde Lees on October 20, 1917 when she was 26 and he 52 gave him the much needed stability and tranquility so far lacking. Two children Anne and Michael were born in 1919 and 1921 respectively. Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923 and was also appointed the Senator of the newly created Irish Free State. His best anthologies –*A Vision* (1925), incorporating his ideas on history and human personality, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* (1933)-all came out around this time. Yeats's meeting with Rabindranath Tagore on 7 July, 1912 in London was historic as it resulted in Yeats's introduction to Tagore's own English Translation of *Gitanjali*, which fetched him Nobel Prize for literature. Yeats continued writing poems till a few days before his death in France on 28 January 1939, which W. H. Auden mourns in the poignant elegy "In Memory of W.B.Yeats".

2. Yeats's Poetry

Paul Poplawski in *English Literature in Context* has simplified the hugely complicated and varied poetic career of Yeats into three broad phases--roughly1886-99, 1900-18, 1919-39-- from a lush- late-romanticism deeply imbued with Celticism, aestheticism, symbolism and esoteric doctrine(e.g. *The Wind Among the Reeds*,1899), through a transitional period of proto-modernistic austerity and impersonality of style(e.g. Responsibilities,1914) to a final phase of fully developed modernism where previous elements of his art fed into a highly complex, self-defining system of mythological thought built on an often obscure visionary symbolism (e.g. *The Tower* 1928)

2.1 Major Themes

2.1.1 Irish Mythology, Narrative, Character and Places

Deeply influences by Symbolism, especially the iconographic approach of Mallarme, Yeats had steeped himself in mysticism and Celtic mythology. Peter Childs observes how Yeats's early Romantic work mirrors an attempt to escape from the urbanism and materialism into the Celtic twilight of pre-industrial rural Ireland's folktales and traditions. The opening lines of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", a poem written when the poet lived in Bedford park, a London suburb, at the age of twenty three, shows his homesickness for Sligo.

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree

And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made

Nine bean- rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,

And live alone in the bee-loud glade(1-4)

The idyllic and harmonious simplicity of life at Innisfree is contrasted with the complications of everyday world. He had also been influenced by his father's reading aloud from the American Transcendental philosopher Thoreau's *Walden* where he describes how he spent two years of blissful solitude in the lap of nature in a cabin built by Walden Pond near Concord in Massachusetts. John Peck and Martin Coyle have commented that the apparently "lazy, reverie-like quality of the poem" leaves behind "the abrasiveness of life" and it "is really a poem of escape, a poem expressing a desire to avoid engagement"(242).

A brilliant employment of alliteration, assonance and consonance, apart from internal rhyme add to the romantic aura of the poem, which belongs to the first phase of the poet's

poetic career and presents Yeats as one of the last romantics. The poem mirrors his intense dislike of life in London where he spent the major part of his life yet is never alluded to directly in any of his poems as well as an intense escapist desire to lead a life in Sligo countryside in the self-sufficient manner demonstrated by Thoreau in *Walden*.

"The Wild Swans at Coole", "Coole park, 1929" and "Coole Park and Baylee,1931" are other poems belonging to this category.

2.1.2. Love

The poet's poems on love depict a vast range of emotions ranging from praise and devotion in the early ones like "The Pity of love" and "The Sorrow of Love" to attempts to come to terms with the passing of love's euphoria and hopefulness in "words", "Reconciliation" and "No Second Troy". "Adam's Curse" is a major poem of 1902 that reveals his mood and inability to maintain "the old high ways of love". The frustration and bitter disillusionment that Yeats had to suffer in his unrequited love forMaud Gonne colours most of his love poems. In "No Second Troy", Yeats expresses both his disagreement with her revolutionary activities and her inciting ignorant men to violence as well as his admiration for her beauty, nobility of mind and her seeming to belong to another world. A parallel is drawn between Maud gonne and Helen of Troy (one which Yeats repeats in many other poems), whose beauty and sexual attraction were instrumental in the destruction of Troy. The striking original conclusion heralds a new kind of love poem

Why, what could she have done, being what she is?

Was there another Troy for her to burn? (11-12)

2.1.3. The Poet's Family and Aristocracy

Certain poems like "Introductory Rhymes", "A prayer for my Daughter" and "Under Saturn" centre on the poet's family. In "A Prayer for My Daughter" the poet prays for the safety of innocents like his daughter Anne and his foreboding regarding their future in the midst of the violence and anarchy let loose by the Russian Revolution, The First World War and the Irish revolt. He prays that his daughter to be blessed with beauty but not similar to Maud Gonne's which was self-destructive. Maud Gonne is equated with mythological figures like Helen, who had much trouble from a "fool" (Paris), Aphrodite, who "being fatherless could have her way/ Yet chose a bandy-legged smith of a man" (Vulcan) .Maud Gonne whose "opinionated mind" filled with "bellows full of angry wind" was widowed by "a drunken vainglorious lout"(Easter 1916). Yeats prays that his daughter may escape the intellectual hatred of Maud gonne that makes one a prisoner of bitterness and arrogance, the aftermath of her fiery involvement with Irish politics.

The only way to counter these evils is through ceremony and innocence, evoked in "A Prayer for my Daughter" through the images of the Horn of Plenty(Cornucopia in Greek mythology is the horn of the goat that suckled the all-powerful Greek god Zeus) and the hidden laurel tree, which convey the essential qualities of harmonious growth and unalloyed happiness. Yeats had firm faith that custom would enable his daughter to recover her innocence and remain happy in a troubled world. ceremony would provide her the means by which the soul could retain its integrity against the vulgarities. David Daiches has pointed out that Yeats's admiration of the great House tradition arises from his faith that it stood for a way of life which converted chaos into order by custom and ceremony.

2.1.4. Poetry

Poetry recurs as a subject of great vigour in many of Yeats's poems. "All Things can tempt me", "The Coming of Wisdom with Time", "A Coat" and "The Fisherman" deal with the difficulties encountered by him regarding inspiration and the vast difference between ambition and reality. The division between poetry and scholars, poet and the people form the subject matter of "The Scholar" and "The People". The most poignant of his poems dealing with the art of poetry is perhaps "The Circus Animal's Desertion", one of his last poems published in 1939.it portrays the poet's inability to write poems and has invited comparisons with Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode". Yeats looks back upon some of the themes of his earlier poems and plays and compares them to circus animals that have deserted him, leaving him with his human passions.

2.1.5. Politics

Political themes abound in Yeats's poetry and poems such as "Upon a House Shaken by the Land of Agitation" , "September 1913" and "to a Shade" exhibit his anger whereas the theme of violence is present in others like "Meditations in Time of Civil War", "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and "Blood and the Man". *Y*eats's bitterness towards politics finds expression in "The Curse of Cromwell' and 'Parnell's Funeral".

"Easter 1916" was written in memory of the Irish revolutionaries who took part in the Irish Uprising of 1916, which saw them occupying the Dublin center, and proclaiming the Irish Republic. After a few days of stiff resistance they surrendered and fifteen of the rebels were executed. The refrain of the poem, "A terrible beauty is born", highlights the antithesis between the "casual comedy" of the Ireland of the past which wore "motley" and the New

Ireland which witnessed the birth of a "terrible beauty". "All changed, changed utterly" laments the poet, and a terrible beauty is born.

The image of the "stone" appearing in the third stanza of the poem transforms the idea of change and adds an ambivalent note to the poem. An ironic reversal of the metaphor of change is introduced in the middle of the poem by declaring that it was not change that transformed these ordinary men and women, but rather their lack of change or steadfastness which turned them into "a stone/ To transform the living stream". Their obsession with one purpose alone—their revolutionary goal of an independent Ireland – makes them the only unchanging objects in a world of flux. Thus the stone comes to signify not merely the immortality of their reputation but their own inflexibility as human beings. The image of the stone represents the poet's own ambivalent attitude towards the revolutionaries and the revolution itself.

2.1.6. Old Age

The theme of old age recurs in many of Yeats's poems like "Sailing to Byzantium" , "Among School Children" and "The Circus Animal's Desertion". Norman Jeffers has classified them into different categories: those which lay upon the themes of detachment of old age in beggars and hermits("Three hermits" , "Beggar to Beggar Cried"), those which are more personal and some which rage about the infirmity of old age("The Wild Old Wicked man", "Are You Content?" or "Why Should not Old Men be Mad?") and others like "The Man and the Echo" and "What Then?" which present the dilemma of not knowing what happens after life.

2.2. Symbolism in Yeats's Poetry

Yeats's interest in French Symbolist poetry, his study of painting and William Blake's poetry, his interest in mysticism, the supernatural and classical literature were all instrumental in the highly developed use of symbols in his poetry.

2.2.1. Inherent and Arbitrary Symbols

In his essay, "Magic", Yeats makes a clear distinction between "inherent symbols and arbitrary symbols"—symbols arising out of a received tradition or seemingly invented arbitrarily by the poet. In his essay, "Prometheus Unbound", Yeats classifies Shelley's symbols as "arbitrary" and explains of Shelley: "his system of thought was constructed by his logical faculty… not a symbolic revelation received" (421). The arbitrary symbol is an emotional symbol as it depends on personal associations whereas the inherent symbol is an intellectual symbol evoking ideas mingled with emotion. Yeats has made use of both kinds of symbols in his poems.

2.2.2 The Influence of Symbolists

Comparing Yeats and Baudelaire, Edward Engelberg has pointed out that for Baudelaire, "the symbol is the end product, not the starting point… Baudelaire is interested primarily in his symbol, not that which goes into its making: the world is used to evoke the symbol. Yeats .. came to work in the opposite direction: he would use the symbol to evoke the world, and his interest, ultimately was less in the symbol than in the things it evoked" (95).

2.3. Symbolism in The Second Coming

"The Second Coming"(1919) which makes use of Yeats's symbols profusely is examined to arrive at a true understanding of the complex technique and multiple associations that lie behind

each of his symbols. The poem presents a terrible prophecy regarding the birth of a new God by ironically fusing Christ's prophecy about his second coming in the Gospel of St. Matthew with St. Johns' description of the beast of the Apocalypse in *Revelations*.

2.3.1 The Gyre Symbol

The opening lines of the poemset the stage for the unleashing of terror, disintegration and chaos.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity. (1-8)

The gyre is one of the most fascinating of Yeats's personal symbol .He first came across it in the 1890s in a poem by Francis Thompson which left such a deep mark that it was quoted thirty years later in *A Vision*. The cyclical theory of history envisaged by Yeats views human civilization as moving forward in antithetical or dialectical epochs of about 2000 years each. The Christian Civilization marked the termination of the Great Babylonian one that began in 2000 B.C. Each cycle of 2000 years contains within itself two smaller cycles of 1000 years each. Since

all existence, historical or individual is a conflict between opposing principles, the principle of objectivity tending towards self-realization and the principle of subjectivity moving in the opposite direction towards self-abnegation, the two smaller cycles within the historical cycle of 2000 years move in opposite directions. The geometrical symbol of gyre or cone was used to represent this conception of time. He conceives of a double gyre, the apex of one touching the base of the other. Each gyre is like a spool with thread wound around it.

The birth of Christ marked the historical cycle of two thousand years of modern civilization. Christ becomes the falconer who inaugurated the first sub-cycle of a thousand years, the winding process of history which ended only to be followed by the second sub-cycle, the unwinding process that witnessed the falcon (man) flying away from the falconer. Yeats envisaged it to come to a close in A.D. 2000 when he expected a catastrophe to happen, the birth of the monstrous beast, which is prophesied in the poem. The anarchy and blood-dimmed tide let loose by the antithetical destructive forces refer to the state of affairs existing around the world at that time- the World war, Russian Revolution and the political turmoil in Ireland. The only means to counter this violence is by retaining the ceremony of innocence, which is referred to in "A Prayer for my Daughter" too, because "innocence alone opposes all sexual and social violence symbolized by the blood-dimmed tide" (Unterecker 166).

The gyre symbol is drawn from occult books and Vivienne Koch points out that Yeats adopts this whirling metaphor to embrace the cyclic movement of history which includes not only the spirits of the dead, but dead cultures and civilizations as well.

2.3.2 The *Spiritus Mundi*

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*

Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds (11-17)

The rough beast foreboding evil, reminiscent of the Beast of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation is said to rise from the *Spiritus Mundi*. Norman Jeffers has defined it as a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit. Also called Anima Mundi, it is the spirit or soul of the universe. Spiritualists call it the subliminal mind and Jung the racial unconscious. Richard Ellmann has observed that in Yeats's view, it is "a corporate imagination" "which creates and stores archetypes, and the man who is able to let his imagination fuse with the corporate imagination has all the images ever wrought by men available to him as the power to create new ones.

2.3.3 The Rough Beast

The foreboding evil is suggested by the beast which is half human and half beast. The creature is obviously not the Egyptian Sphinx of wisdom which killed travelers for their failure to solve its riddle, what is being born is endangered from something neither Greek nor Christian, but more primeval overlooked by both as A. G. Stock explains. Denis Donoghue says that Yeats's beast is related to Christ as phantom to man. Yeats believed that time was ripe for a reversal of the present civilization and another one antithetical to

the present one was about to arise which was symbolized by the beast. The creature is a supernatural monster and hence beyond the moral concerns regarding good and evil which explains the "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun".

The wheeling movement of the falcon rising higher and higher at the beginning is directly linked with the desert birds reeling around the monstrous beast and both images recall the central image that links all others-- that of the double interpenetrating gyres. Yeats humanizes the reaction of the birds through the adjective "indignant".

The concluding lines raise a question and recalls the fact that the Yeatsian cycle of the 2000 years of Christian civilization is drawing to a close and that the new era is not a result of the old, but its doom. The reference to Bethlehem is a bitterly ironical echo of St. Matthew who speaks of the Son coming as the Sun from the East.