

# YEATS' CONTRIBUTION IN SHAPING IRELAND, AS A NATIONAL POET

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**Abstract-**The paper attempts to look at the contribution of W.B. Yeats in making Ireland a better place, through his poetry. He retained his creative spark until the very end of his life. As a writer he delved into the Ireland of his time, which happened to be a vital era of nation-building during which Ireland's modern identity was being forged. His history poems bring Ireland's past to life.

**Keywords-**Independence, Irish politics, Nationalism, Revive, Rebellion.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Yeats has been received as Ireland's Shakespeare, a writer who explored the contemporary Ireland, which happened to be a vital era of nation-building during which Ireland's modern identity was being forged. I consider Yeats as a powerful, perceptive interpreter of that seminal period, not just for Ireland, but for these islands and our connected histories. Like Shakespeare, he bequeathed us a rich trove of memorable lines and precious insights. Moreover, Yeats's work – his history poems –revives Ireland's past to life, doing for Ireland what Shakespeare does for England in his history plays. In his youth, Yeats wanted to bring Ireland to the level of England and France and this he could do by reviving the ancient heroic Ireland. He was born in a period when Ireland was struggling for its freedom and the leaders were using literature to arouse patriotic feelings in the Irish people. A number of poets, belonging to the revolutionary young Ireland Party, who were active politically, were Thomas D'Arcy Mac Gee, Sir Edmund Ferguson, William Allingham and Thomas Osborne Davis. These predecessors of Yeats did revive

Ireland's past glory and aroused nationalist feelings.

## II. YEATS: CULTURAL ATTITUDE

Yeats contributed to the cultural churn that helped change Ireland in the decades before independence. At the age of twenty-four he wrote to Elizabeth White:

You will find a good thing to make verses on Irish Legends and places so forth. It helps originality and makes one's verses sincere and gives one less numerous competitors. Besides, one should love best what is nearest and interwoven in one's life. (*Letter of*

*W.B. Yeats*, 104)

Yeats's plays and poetry is to a large extent his ideal. The great success of Tone and Fitzgerald integrated Ireland into a nation. Yeats remembered these leaders of the United Irishmen in the poem "September 1913". The eight "Irish" poems in *Crossways* are marked by Yeats's originality. They, of course, as pointed out by David Daiches, "present the dichotomy of the human world and the wild world". (*The Earlier Poems: Some Themes and Patterns*, 13)

These eight poems rooted in the Irish soil are better than the poems he had written earlier. Yeats realized this fact well in time. He wrote to Katharine Tynan:

I feel more and more that we shall have a school of poetry founded on Irish myth and history a new romantic movement. (*The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, 33.)

After these short poems, Yeats wrote the ambitious "Wanderings of Oisín" that won him fame.

This poem is the result of Yeats's active involvement in Irish politics and study of the contemporary patriotic literature. The great quality of the poem is that, though modelled partly on Spenser's *Fairy Queen* it is rooted in the Irish soil. The next volume *The Rose*, published in 1893, advances towards a clearer expression of Yeats's nationalism and involvement in politics. The period between 1887 and 1891 was one of the decisions to write poetry on Irish material and revive the ancient Ireland. The poems in *The Rose* are symbolical and these symbols having their source in the Irish mythology and folktales are used to evoke the image that unifies the nation, the race and the individual, certainly a political aim. After the invocation, he narrates the deeds of the legendary Irish heroes. He wishes the rose to come nearer to him so that he will not be misled by petty things, but not so near to make him almost breathless by its powerful influence.

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree", one of the most anthologised poems of Yeats, is essentially a longing for Sligo, although it has been considered as man's desire for peace and happiness in a world of hurry and scurry. Till 1891 Yeats was under the hope that the leadership of Charles Parnell Ireland would gain freedom and he would be able to make his country achieve "Unity of Culture" by means of literature. He, therefore, linked Sligo and the places around it with the legendary and mythical figures to arouse patriotic feelings.

### III. THE POLITICAL PERSPECT

The best in the volume "The Wind Among the Reeds" are the political poems where symbols are used with great precision and which evoke multiplicity of emotions. After Parnell's death, Yeats did not give up politics entirely. He cherished the hope of reviving the heroic Ireland and continued to support the Parnellite group in politics. The important poems in *Responsibility* illustrate Yeats's view point of combining politics and poetry. The poems "September 1913", "To a Wealthy Man", and "To a Friend" were during the period of controversy over the Hume Lane pictures. In the controversy Yeats saw

a threat to art and poetry, the means by which the unity of culture could be established in Ireland.

O'Brien's main aim in his long paper "Passion and Cunning: Yeats's Politics", is to prove that Yeats was an opportunist politician who watched the opportune time to write or publish political poems. But we can say confidently that O'Brien is prejudiced against Yeats who was always against abstraction and calculation. The "Notes" make it amply clear that Yeats's purpose in writing poems like "To A Wealthy Man" and "September 1913" was not only criticize the middle class but also to show the Irish people the value of culture and art.

Yeats abandoned the tone of "To A Wealthy Man" in "September 1913" and advised them to multiply their money as they were want to:

**What need you, being come to sense,**

**But fumble in a greasy till**

**And add the half pence to the pence**

**And prayer to shivering prayer, until**

**You have dried the marrow from the bone?**

**(Collected Poems, 120-21)**

The "Paudeens" are contrasted with the heroic figures of the past. "To A Friend" and "Paudeen" assert the poet's pride and solitariness against the middle class. They are closely related to "September 1913" and "To A Wealthy Man". "To a Friend" is a consolation to Lady Gregory, suggesting her to keep quiet and not to care for her failure in her attempt to help Sir Hugh Lane because for a lady of her qualities it is difficult to compete with shameless people:

**Now all the truth is out**

**Be secret and take defeat**

**From the brazen throat**

**For how can you compete,**

**Being honoured bred.... (Collected Poems, 122)**

The best thing, therefore, is to accept defeat heroically:

**Be secret and exult**

**Because of all things known**

**That is most difficult. (*Collected Poems*, 122)**

These concluding lines, though meant to console Lady Gregory, console all those who have worked hard for a noble cause but have been thwarted in their endeavour by lumpen elements.

Easter 1916 was the date decided for the rebellion. "Sixteen Dead Men" is a poem written on the death of the revolutionaries. The Easter poems outlive their time. No doubt, they deal with the sacrifice of the Irish heroes-the heroes whom Yeats admired. The two other poems "On a Political Prisoner" and "The Leaders of the crowd" expose the limitation of Yeats's Political ideas and women's role in active politics. The second poem "The Leader of The Crowd" further exposes the hollowness of Yeats's penchant for aristocracy. Although Yeats felt the effect of the First World War, he did not write a single poem on it. The reason was that he was more concerned with Ireland's freedom and her cultural identity. For him the Easter Rising was more important than the war between England and Germany. The poem entitled "Nineteen hundred and nineteen" may be divided structurally into three parts, although it consists of six sections.

Professor A.G. Stock remarks that:

"Taken as a continuous meditation the six parts all but lose coherence. (*His History and Thought*, 129)

The poems written after 1916 bear testimony to Yeats's active involvement in politics. "Easter 1916", "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", "The Second Coming" and "Meditation in Time of Civil War" have, no doubt their source in contemporary politics, but they are more philosophical in nature. Yeats was nominated a senator of the Irish free state by the efforts of his friend Oliver Gogarty. Though Yeats liked being a senator and enjoyed the position life was

not smooth. The civil war that ensued made the life of the senators perilous. While in the senate, Yeats systemised his political ideas. But in his speeches, he was more a poet than a politician. Yeats was delighted when he visited a school run on the Montessori method. He linked his concept of education with his experience in the school in "Among School Children" which conveys Yeats's ideas expressed in his famous speech in the senate. The opening lines of the poem describe the poet's visit in the capacity of a senator:

A walk through the long schoolroom  
questioning;

**A kind old nun in a white hood replies;**

**The children to cipher and to sing,**

**The reading-books and histories,**

**To cut and saw, he neat in everything**

**In the best modern way-the children's eyes**

**In momentary wonder stare upon**

A sixty-year-old smiling public man.  
(*Collected Poems*, 242-43)

Yeats's idea of education is that it should make a balance between the body and the soul. This idea is expressed in the final stanza of "Among School Children" in the images of the chestnut tree and the dancer. It is only in the last stanza that the antimonies of body and soul and beauty and wisdom are resolved in the image of the chestnut tree, and the dancer in action. Before his retirement from the senate Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespeare:

Once out of the senate-my time is up in September  
and in obedience to the doctors, out of all public  
works there is no reason for more than three months  
of Dublin-where the Abbey is the one work I cannot  
wholly abandon. Once out of Dublin bitterness I can  
find some measure of sweetness of light, as befits old  
age. (*The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, 726)

#### IV. YEATS AND THE OTHER CRITICS

Retiring from the senate he busied himself in writing poetry and reading books on history and philosophy. The poems Yeats wrote during the period he was a senator are the best fruit of his political, philosophical and occultist ideas, all the three forget together for the attainment of unity of culture and unity of being. Yeats studied the works of Swift, Berkeley, Burke and Gentile while he was revising the text of *A Vision*. He arrived at the conclusion that Gentile had derived many of his ideas from Berkeley. Swift, Burke and Berkeley unified Ireland in the eighteenth century, when balance between the executive, aristocracy and peasantry was maintained. But this state of liberty did not last long as, later on, a new class, the middle class, emerged and began to dominate the Irish scene. Yeats argues that if liberty is to be achieved, there is the necessity to reverse the process of progression. Yeats's political philosophy has its source in the writings of Swift, Burke, Berkeley and Goldsmith who had an international outlook were all humanitarians. It is under the influence of Swift that Yeats wrote his poem "The Remorse for Intemperate Speech". The other important element in Yeats's last poems is "Irishry". He loved all those Irishmen who did something for the country. Since England had ruled Ireland for long time and persecuted a large number of Irish patriots, he hated the empire and its rulers. Yeats wanted the common people to know the Irish heroes, he wrote political ballads. He was well aware of the fact that his serious and difficult poems would be confined to the intellectual class only and so he wrote ballads in a simple language to be sung by the folk.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The other important work "Under Ben Bulben", a long poem, reflects Yeats's views on poetry, art, politics and life. This poem gives us an idea of Yeats's thought-process during the fag end of life. The poem "The Municipal Gallery revisited" is a poetic rendering of the best men (both Protestant and Catholic) of Ireland. We should consider "Under Ben Bulben" his last poem as Yeats intended it to be. The poem ends with a rare calm and peace of mind. The violent, bitter, passionate aristocrat understands the

meaning of life and also of death. The final section is an epitaph that speaks volumes on the ideal attitude of life and death:

**Under bare Ben Bulben's head**

**In Dancliff Churchyard Yeats is laid**

**An ancestor was rector there**

**Long years ago, a church stands near,**

**By the road on ancient cross**

**No marble, no Conventional phrase;**

**On limestone quarried near the spot**

Yeats's poetry is more important than politics like great poets, Yeats always rose above ephemerality of politics and attempted at achieving permanence in poetry by following a philosophical system. As a poet he was concerned with human values. He argued that there should be a proper balance between matter and spirit, between the body and the soul. Spirit is more important but it has its proper place in the body. Yeats used the Political events but philosophised them to make his poetry have universal appeal. He linked politics with poetry. Passion and love drove him throughout his life; he was a poet of love and friendship. He had a tremendous capacity for development and his poetry also show a similar curve. He is the greatest poet of the twentieth century and ranks with the greatest poets of the world.

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