William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

William Butler Yeats (June 13, 1865–January 28, 1939) was an Irish poet, playwright, and one of the foremost figures of 20th-century literature. He played a pivotal role in the Irish literary revival and was deeply involved in the cultural and political landscape of Ireland. Here is an overview of his life and work:

Early Life

Born in Sandymount, Dublin, Yeats spent much of his childhood in County Sligo, which greatly influenced his poetic imagery and themes.

He was educated in London and Dublin, where he developed an early interest in mysticism, folklore, and the occult, which remained central to his work.

Literary Career

Early Poetry: His early work, such as *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889), is marked by romanticism and an interest in Irish mythology.

Mature Work: His poetry evolved, showing greater philosophical depth and stylistic modernism. Notable collections include *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933).

Themes: Yeats often explored themes of Irish nationalism, love, aging, mysticism, and the interplay of personal and universal struggles.

Key Works

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree": A meditation on solitude and nature, symbolizing a yearning for peace.

"Easter 1916": A reflection on the Irish Easter Rising, with the famous refrain, "A terrible beauty is born."

"The Second Coming": A haunting vision of societal upheaval and change, with its memorable opening, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre."

"Sailing to Byzantium": A meditation on art, immortality, and the aging process.

❖ **Contribution to Theater**

Yeats co-founded the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904, promoting Irish drama and playwrights. His own plays, such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, reflected his nationalist ideals and poetic vision.

Awards and Recognition

In 1923, Yeats received the Nobel Prize in Literature, recognized for his "always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation."

Later Life

Yeats remained a prolific writer until his death in 1939. His later work often tackled personal and political themes with a stark, unflinching style.

Easter, 1916

By William Butler Yeats

I have met them at close of day

Coming with vivid faces

From counter or desk among grey

Eighteenth-century houses.

I have passed with a nod of the head

Or polite meaningless words,

Or have lingered awhile and said

Polite meaningless words,

And thought before I had done

Of a mocking tale or a gibe

To please a companion

Around the fire at the club,

Being certain that they and I

But lived where motley is worn:

All changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent

In ignorant good-will,

Her nights in argument

Until her voice grew shrill.

What voice more sweet than hers

When, young and beautiful,

She rode to harriers?

This man had kept a school

And rode our wingèd horse;

This other his helper and friend

Was coming into his force;

He might have won fame in the end,

So sensitive his nature seemed,

So daring and sweet his thought.

This other man I had dreamed

A drunken, vainglorious lout.

He had done most bitter wrong

To some who are near my heart,

Yet I number him in the song;

He, too, has resigned his part

In the casual comedy;

He, too, has been changed in his turn,

Transformed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone

Through summer and winter seem

Enchanted to a stone

To trouble the living stream.

The horse that comes from the road,

The rider, the birds that range

From cloud to tumbling cloud,

Minute by minute they change;

A shadow of cloud on the stream

Changes minute by minute;

A horse-hoof slides on the brim,

And a horse plashes within it;

The long-legged moor-hens dive,

And hens to moor-cocks call;

Minute by minute they live:

The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice

Can make a stone of the heart.

O when may it suffice?

That is Heaven's part, our part

To murmur name upon name,

As a mother names her child

When sleep at last has come

On limbs that had run wild.

What is it but nightfall?

No, no, not night but death;

Was it needless death after all?

For England may keep faith

For all that is done and said.

We know their dream; enough

To know they dreamed and are dead;

And what if excess of love

Bewildered them till they died?

I write it out in a verse—

MacDonagh and MacBride

And Connolly and Pearse

Now and in time to be,

Wherever green is worn,

Are changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.

No Second Troy

William Butler Yeats

Why should I blame her that she filled my days

With misery, or that she would of late

Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,

Or hurled the little streets upon the great,

Had they but courage equal to desire?

What could have made her peaceful with a mind

That nobleness made simple as a fire,

With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind

That is not natural in an age like this,

Being high and solitary and most stern?

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

Was there another Troy for her to burn?

When You Are Old

William Butler Yeats

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,

And nodding by the fire, take down this book,

And slowly read, and dream of the soft look

Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,

And loved your beauty with love false or true,

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,

And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,

Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled

And paced upon the mountains overhead

And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

The Sorrow of Love

William Butler Yeats

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,

The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,

And all that famous harmony of leaves,

Had blotted out man's image and his cry.

A girl arose that had red mournful lips

And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,

Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships

And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,

A climbing moon upon an empty sky,

And all that lamentation of the leaves,

Could but compose man's image and his cry.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

William Butler Yeats

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.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,

Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;

There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,

And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;

While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

A Prayer for My Daughter

William Butler Yeats

Once more the storm is howling, and half hid

Under this cradle-hood and coverlid

My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle

But Gregory's wood and one bare hill

Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,

Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;

And for an hour I have walked and prayed

Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour

And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,

And under the arches of the bridge, and scream

In the elms above the flooded stream;

Imagining in excited reverie

That the future years had come,

Dancing to a frenzied drum,

Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

May she be granted beauty and yet not

Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,

Or hers before a looking glass, for such,

Being made beautiful overmuch,

Consider beauty a sufficient end,

Lose natural kindness and maybe

The heart-revealing intimacy

That chooses right, and never find a friend.

Helen being chosen found life flat and dull

And later had much trouble from a fool,

While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,

Being fatherless could have her way

Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man.

It's certain that fine women eat

A crazy salad with their meat,

Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.

In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned;

Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned

By those that are not entirely beautiful;

Yet many, that have played the fool

For beauty's very self, has charm made wise,

And many a poor man that has roved,

Loved and thought himself beloved,

From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes.

May she become a flourishing hidden tree

That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,

And have no business but dispensing round

Their magnanimities of sound,

Nor but in merriment begin a chase,

Nor but in merriment a quarrel.

Oh, may she live like some green laurel

Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,

The sort of beauty that I have approved,

Prosper but little, has dried up of late,

Yet knows that to be choked with hate

May well be of all evil chances chief.

If there's no hatred in a mind

Assault and battery of the wind

Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,

So let her think opinions are accursed.

Have I not seen the loveliest woman born1

Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,

Because of her opinionated mind

Barter that horn and every good

By quiet natures understood

For an old bellows full of angry wind?

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,

The soul recovers radical innocence

And learns at last that it is self-delighting,

Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,

And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;

She can, though every face should scowl

And every windy quarter howl

Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house

Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;

For arrogance and hatred are the wares

Peddled in the thoroughfares.

How but in custom and in ceremony

Are innocence and beauty born?

Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,

And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

Sailing to Byzantium

William Butler Yeats

I

That is no country for old men. The young

In one another's arms, birds in the trees,

—Those dying generations—at their song,

The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,

Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long

Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

Caught in that sensual music all neglect

Monuments of unageing intellect.

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.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire

As in the gold mosaic 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.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take

My bodily form from any natural thing,

But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make

Of hammered gold and gold enamelling

To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;

Or set upon a golden bough to sing

To lords and ladies of Byzantium

Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Course Instructor:

Shaon Gharami

Lecturer

Department of English, UGV

Cellular: 01837-637679, Email: shaongharami405@yahoo.com