UNIT 43 W.B. YEATS: BACKGROUND, SYSTEM, AND POETIC CAREER UP TO 1910

Structure

43.0 Objectives
43.1 Introduction
43.2 The Quest for Irishness
43.3 Magic, Mythology, and Symbolism
43.4 A Less Dream-Burdened Will
43.5 Yeats's Ireland
43.6 The System: Mask, Moon, and Gyre
43.7 Poetic Career ([illegible]-1910)
43.8 'Adam's Curse'
43.9 'No Second Troy'
43.10 Let Us Sum Up
43.11 Questions

43.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you to the historical and intellectual background to the poetry of W.B. Yeats, one of the most important poets of the twentieth century. It will also trace his poetic development up to 1910 since from around that time there is a sharp change in style. It will consider two poems from this early period for close reading.

43.1 INTRODUCTION

W.B. Yeats won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. His poetic career moves from the pre-modern to the modern: he was master of both the styles. Always interested in magic and the occult, Yeats challenged mechanistic conceptions of the universe by foregrounding the former along with Celtic mythology and symbolism. Soon enough the actual world enters into his poetry. He constructs a philosophical system in order to organize the anarchy of modern civilization. His entire poetic career is stamped with a dialectical schematism, essentially of flesh and spirit. Beginning with escape to a fairyland he searches for another kind of escape, into a world of pure ideas.

43.2 THE QUEST FOR IRISHNESS

W.B. Yeats was born in Ireland to John Butler Yeats, a painter, and Susan Pollexfen, who came from a family of shipowners. Through his father's family and the literary company that met at their house, Yeats was exposed early to the ferment of ideas and intellectual conversation in London and in Howth, near Dublin. By contrast, the Pollexfens offered an alternative model of instinct, physical prowess and practical wisdom. Yeats's father thought that the fusion was poetically fruitful for his son. This may well have been the basis for a cast of mind that habitually expressed itself in terms of polarities and antitheses. As Yeats himself has put it in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), when we quarrel with others we produce rhetoric but when we quarrel with ourselves we produce poetry. His doctrine of the Mask, his lunar symbolism, and his symbol of the interpenetrating gyres of history are all characterised by a dialectical schematism: the self versus the anti-self, the new or dark moon versus the full moon, the widening and narrowing gyres. The schematism which helped Yeats order a disintegrating civilisation may have been prompted by the duality of his Anglo-Irish identity and reinforced by his reading of Blake, Swedenborg and ultimately the earlier Neo-Platonist thinkers. The existential antinomy of flesh and spirit finds resolution in Yeats's pursuit of passionate wisdom which promises deliverance from the disturbing aspects of the life of flesh unmitigated by the onset of old age.

His mother's family lived in Sligo, on the west coast of Ireland where, apart from London, he spent much of his youth. A few miles north of Sligo was the mountain of

Ben Bulben (immortalised in poems like 'Under Ben Bulben') under which was Drumcliff churchyard, Yeats's chosen place of burial. The Sligo landscape, evocatively captured in his early poetry, like 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' or 'The Stolen Child' is steeped in Gaelic folklore and superstition. As Yeats's notes to his *Collected Poems* explain, after *Crossways*, his subject matter, especially in *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) became Irish. For reasons spelt out in an essay, 'Ireland and the Arts' (*Essays and Introductions*), Yeats decides to give up Arcadian and Indian scenes and never to 'go for the scenery of a poem to any country but my own, and I think that I shall hold to that conviction to the end.' But at this stage of his poetic career, Sligo remained a nostalgic and escapist refuge from the harshness and fragmentation of modern urban civilization.

While Yeats's attempt to construct a distinctively Irish identity was overlaid with antiquarian and sentimental recovery of Celtic myth, magic, legend, and folklore, his father introduced him to the English poetic tradition, the Pre-Raphaelites and *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes in particular. Being Irish, he had difficulties in his London school; in Ireland, his Anglo-Norman origins linked him to the Protestant Ascendancy, a class that had its loyalties divided between England and Ireland, and was virtually wiped out in the 1916 Easter rebellion and the Civil War. Of course, this dilemma of Anglo-Irishness did not extend to the Catholic peasantry; in history it went back to the eighteenth century.

Although Yeats was of a religious temperament and delighted in reverie, he imbibed from his father's circle a lack of enthusiasm for institutionalized religion. The dissatisfaction with Christianity springs in part from the dogmatic rationalism of the orthodox Protestant tradition but largely from the attempt to recover the Fenian traditions of pre-colonial Ireland. In contrast to the exhausted sense of coming at the end of a tradition that affects the work of English poets like Hardy and Edward Thomas, Yeats hopes 'to create some new *Prometheus Unbound*; Patrick or Columcille, Oisin or Finn, in Prometheus's stead; and instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulben' (*Autobiographies*). Thus in challenging the drabness of a civilization dominated by calculating rationalism, technology, and the mercenary ethic, Yeats was spiritually akin to Eliot, although unlike the latter he turned to the heterodox tradition and studied the occult sciences.

43.3 MAGIC, MYTHOLOGY, AND SYMBOLISM

Magic and the mystical life became for the young Yeats the most important pursuit of his life after poetry. If Christianity offered Eliot a unifying design to accommodate the fragmentation of modern society, for Yeats this role was performed by magic and mythology. The first mythology was to be historical, pantheistic, prophetic as well as local and patriotic: 'Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that

marries them to rock and hill?' (*Autobiographies*). This unity of being, equally relevant to race and individual personality and often symbolized in the perfectly proportioned human body, is rooted in the *Anima Mundi*, a version of the Collective Unconscious, a vast storehouse of images. Unity of being can be attained through the projection into consciousness of men's common ancestral memories: 'Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind' (*Autobiographies*).

Yeats was probably introduced to cabbalistic experiments by George Pollexfen, his astrologer uncle. As early as 1885, when his first poems were published in the *Dublin University Review*, Yeats ch[illegible]d the first meeting of the Dublin Hermetic Society. Katharine Tynan, the poetess, first took Yeats to a seance and in 1887 he met the magician M[illegible]thers and in 1890 joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn founded by the latter for the study and practice of magic. In the same year Yeats had joined the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky. From her law of periodicity Yeats may have acquired the cyclical conception of history with a divine incarnation at the beginning of each cycle, as the stories in *The Secret Rose* (1897) as well as his later poetry show.

Even as he was exploring the occult, Yeats was actively engaged in the literary world of his time, in editing and journalism. He was a founding member of the Rhymers' Club and the Irish Literary Society in London (1891) and Dublin (1892). As Richard Ellmann has shown (*Yeats, The Man and the Masks*), Yeats's discovery of split selves within, of a self and anti-self, which gave rise to his doctrine of the Mask was aided by the aesthetes' conception of the artistic personality as really two men. From his roots in decadent aestheticism, Yeats expanded his symbolist vision by giving it an Irish identity as well as tapping the resources of magic, myth, and superstition that were available among the Irish Catholic peasantry. Like Lady Gregory he collected Irish folklore and his three anthologies of nineteenth-century Irish literature-*Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), *Stories from Carleton* (1889), and *Representative Irish Tales* (1891)–show his wide reading which informed his early poems like *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), plays like *The Countess Kathleen* (1892), and *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), and of course his own collection of Irish stories *The Celtic Twilight* (1893, revised and enlarged 1902). Throughout this latter book there is a desire to enlarge beyond folk-literature to a vision of the unity of man and nature that reason, science and the abstracting Anglo-Saxon mind had ruptured, and that could be recovered through the 'symbolic correspondences' of Swedenborg and Blake.

As he moved among Celtic heroes and heroines in a wistfully primitivist, pre-Christian landscape, his growing interest in symbols was strengthened by his experience of editing Blake's *Works* (1893) and by his friendship with Arthur Symons. The latter initiated him into Symbolist doctrines, and in 1894 in Paris, he attended a performance of Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Axel* which affected him deeply. The influence of the French symbolists, including Mallarmè, and that of Maurice Maeterlinck is discernible in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). Magic offered to the symbolists a reinforcement of their belief in the power of word or symbol to evoke a reality otherwise inaccessible. As a movement it challenged the hegemony of science and rationalism. In a letter to O'Leary, Yeats wrote of 'a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaesance [sic]–the revolt of the soul against the intellect–now beginning in the world.'

For Yeats's early symbolism we have to go to *The Rose* (1893) *and The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). The symbols are drawn from the natural world, say, of woods, waves, winds or stars, which resolve themselves into the four elements–earth, water, air, fire-and their conjunctions and oppositions. The moon usually stands for weariness (as often in Shelley), water for the fugitive nature of beauty, the rose for the principle of Eternal Beauty, and the veil for the life of ecstatic reverie hidden from the world. Into the four basic elements merge the Irish mythological figures. The unifying bond is that of the lover to his mistress and thereby to Nature. But the abundance of pale waters, white stars, dim sea, dim sand and so on ultimately build

EXPERTS COMMITTEE

Prof. R.K. Agnihotri
Delhi University, New Delhi.

Prof. Walter R. Desai
Delhi University, New Delhi

Prof. Malashree Lal
Delhi University, New Delhi

Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah
Dhvanyaloka, Mysore

Dr. Shyamla Narayan
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Prof. M.L. Raina
Panjab University, Chandigarh

Prof. Mohan Ramanan
University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad

Prof. K.V.S. Subba Rao
Delhi University, New Delhi

Prof. Rajeev Verma
Delhi University

IGNOU Faculty

Prof. Asha S. Kanwar

Dr. R. Nandyal

Dr. A.B. Sharma

Dr. Renu Bhardwaj

Dr. Anju Sehgal Gupta

Ms. Neera Singh

COURSE PREPARATION

Prof. Sirsendu Chakravarty
Delhi University (South Campus)
Units 42, 43 & 44

Dr. M.L. Pandit
Retired from IGNOU
Units 45, 46 & 47

COURSE COORDINATION & EDITING

Dr. Amiya Bhushan Sharma
IGNOU

COVER DESIGNS AND OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

The cover designs are works of Ms. Ketaki Kushahari Sharma (Class IX) of Mother's International School. The portraits of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot were also done by her. These were scanned by the DTP center at IGNOU. Sri Pankaj Khare finally prepared the front cover design with the help of illustration on the diskette. Thanks are acknowledged to both for their contribution.

PRODUCTION

Ms. P. Gupta, CE,
Camera Ready Copy Prepared by: Sh. A.S.V. Venkateswar, PA

April, 1999

© Indira Gandhi National University

ISBN-81-7605-543-3

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any form, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission in writing from the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

Further information, about the Indira Gandhi National Open University Courses may be obtained from the University's office at Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110 068.

Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University by Prof. V.R. Jagannathan, Director, SOH.

Printed at : Sudarshan Graphics, Kankaria, Ahmedabad-28. Ph.079-25430560

up a shadowy and languorous wor... Even the esoteric and secret symbol of the Rose, so central to the Order of t! Golden Dawn and so various in its meanings, cannot quite break the mood of dreaminess. However, it is in Yeats's control of a simple and passionate diction and rhythm that an intellectual sturdiness becomes discernible.

43.4 A LESS DREAM-BURDENED WILL

The various factors that helped bring a less dream-burdened will into Yeats's poetry include embittered disillusionment in love, experiences at the Abbey Theatre, political involvement and anguish at violence sweeping across Europe. His friendships and liaisons with women managed to draw him out of his shell. He met Maud Gonne in 1889, an encounter that was to transform his life. His infatuation for her drew him into nationalist politics about which, despite strong patriotic feeling, his attitude remained ambivalent. Despite remaining aloof from her brand of incendiary zeal, Yeats came to play an increasingly important role in Irish public life becoming a Senator of the Irish Free State (1922-28) and winning the Nobel Prize in 1923. Maud Gonne's stubborn refusal to marry him led to his happy marriage to George Hyde-Lees. Even as Yeats came to see Maud Gonne and other such female revolutionaries in terms of a tragic fate whereby unity of being was mutilated, she became a recognizable, flesh-and-blood individual freed of the patina of early symbolism. From *The Green Helmet* (1910) onwards, she enabled Yeats to link the anarchy of his private life to the larger context of Civil War and the First World War.

After his first meeting with Lady Gregory and Synge in 1896, Yeats spent the summer of 1897 at Lady Gregory's house, Coole Park, near Galway. Their collaboration bore fruit in the Abbey Theatre as a director of which Yeats was plunged into 'theatre-business, management of men.' This experience not only brought out the practical man in him but deeply enriched his style through the influence of speech and dialogue. Ezra Pound, his secretary from 1913-16, introduced him to the anti-naturalist and symbolical art of the Japanese Noh drama and encouraged him towards a resolutely concrete diction. The resultant spareness of language and style is evident in his play *At the Hawk's Well* (1916).

43.5 YEATS'S IRELAND

Lady Gregory offered an alternative to Maud Gonne by virtue of her caring support for Yeats's writing. Her Coole Park estate not only gave him the time and place to write but also became a model of aristocratic nobility. Ireland in the early twentieth century was not only different from England but even from the Ireland of Synge and O'Casey. It was the least industrialized country in western Europe with virtually no middle class outside the big cities. The people who impinged on Yeats's consciousness and on Irish history were the peasants and the landlords in the big houses. Yeats's obsession with ancestral houses like Coole Park which were in decline or burnt down in the agrarian unrest of the Civil War was coloured by a nostalgic view of the bond between landlord and servant. Since the landlords were mostly Protestant in origin and Unionist in sympathy while the common people mostly Catholic, the former in their search for identity were drawn to the world of myth, ritual, legend, and imagery rejected by Protestant nationalism but nurtured by the Catholic peasantry. In highlighting the rooted affinity of the dream of the noble and the beggar-man, Yeats expressed his contempt for and distrust of the newly-emerging middle-class. Aristocracy thus offered a vantage-point from which Yeats, like Pound and Eliot in their admittedly different ways, attempted a critique of capitalist-democratic values. The metaphor of horseman and the races in 'At Galway Races' harks back to an age when poetry was central to human existence: 'Before the merchant and the clerk/Breathed on the world with timid breath.' As the poem, 'September 1913,' from Yeats's middle period shows, such timidity is the product of the nexus between acquisitive instinct and calculating piety: half pence is added to pence as prayer to shivering prayer until the marrow is dried from the bone.

Ironically it is this world emptied of the heroic for which the Irish martyrs, the wild geese, were laying down their lives.

Placed within the larger context of the marginalization of art and the artist in Europe, Yeats saw the poet's role in somewhat Shelleyan terms, as that of an unacknowledged legislator. If on the one hand, Yeats strives to break away from a sentimentalized Ireland, on the other, Ireland for him was a visionary project to recover buried spiritual identity which was impeded by the revolutionary politics. Thus the Easter uprising becomes for him much more than the search for political independence. In one of Yeats's last poems, 'The Statues,' we find Patrick Pearse, Irish revolutionary leader, summoning Cuchulain, the mythical hero, to his side and the moment of disintegration initiates the realization of unity of being represented in the proportioned human body:

> We Irish, born into that ancient sect
> But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
> And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,
> Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
> The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.

43.6 THE SYSTEM: MASK, MOON, AND GYRE

Marriage not only gave Yeats stability and direction but more specifically, the supposedly automatic writing of his wife brought metaphors for poetry, the symbol of the gyre, moon, and mask that became the basis for his philosophical system *A Vision* (1925, revised 1937). Of course the doctrine of the Mask can be traced back to *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), if not even further back to the aesthetes' notion of the artistic personality. The self was contraposed to the anti-self; individuals as well as civilizations aspire to such antitheses in search of unity of being:

> If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask.
>
> (*Mythologies*)

As is evident from this extract, the doctrine possibly has its true origin in Yeats's experience as a dramatist and theatre-manager, in particular the masked theatre of the Japanese Noh or the Greeks. The masked performance of our own lives involves an artistic transformation of the disorder backstage: art is thus a mask even as aristocracy is. Human beings as well as entire epochs have their masks.

Human personality and history are divided into 28 types corresponding to the 28 phases of the moon. Phase 1 (when the moon is dark) and Phase 15 (full moon) are states of perfection accessible only to spirits or the symbols of poetry: the waxing and waning of the moon accommodate the opposition of Primary and Antithetical tinctures, of the egoist and the saint, the artist and the businessman. The underlying conception of personality fits in admirably with the doctrine of the Mask, since the antithetical Mask is 'the form created by passion to unite us to ourselves.' Starting from Phase 1, man seeks his opposite at Phase 15, and then returns to the original point achieving union in and through division.

A new corollary symbol was introduced in automatic writing: the gyre, the whirling cone, the pern or spool. European history was diagrammatically interpreted in terms of interpenetrating cones whirling inside one another, one subjective, the other objective. At the time of Christ, objectivity is at its fullest expansion while the Renaissance is the time of fullest subjectivity; in modern times, there is again a swing

towards objectivity, towards democracy, socialism, communism. As Yeats's note to the Cuala Press edition of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* explains,

> the end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion . . All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash, though in a flash that will not strike only in one place, and will for a time be constantly repeated of the civilization that must slowly take its place . . . the revelation . . . [will] . . . establish again for two thousand years prince and vizier.

At the dead centre of the two thousand year cycle (corresponding to the 28 phases of the moon) which define the beginning and end of modern times comes the superbly integrated art of Byzantium.

The three central symbols of the mask, the moon, and the gyres admirably represent Yeats's antinomies by remaining anchored in common experience. The mask, we have seen, is fundamentally a theatrical metaphor while the moon suggests fickle fortune and the associative cluster of female fertility, virginity, and sensuality. The gyres give new meaning to the childhood experience at Sligo where he saw 'a little column of smoke from "the pern mill," and was told that 'pern" was another name for the spool, as I was accustomed to call it, on which thread was wound' (Notes on 'Shepherd and Goatherd' in *Collected Poems*). The gyre image in particular simply haunts Yeats: the winding stair of the tower he bought, the flight of the falcon ('pern' also meant a small hawk) or the swans ('scatter wheeling in great broken rings'), the shining web wound by Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers with floating ribbons of cloth ('Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'), the silken, embroidered cloth bound and wound round the scabbard of a sword ('A Dialogue of Self and Soul'), even the mummy-cloth in which mummies are wound ('Byzantium').

43.7 POETIC CAREER (1889-1910)

The poetic career of Yeats falls into an early and a later phase, each apparently opposed to the other and yet inspired by a similar longing for escape from a world dominated by mechanistic and positivistic conceptions. As we have seen, in the early phase his specific mode of release was somewhat escapist, his fancy spiriting him away from a busy London street to the fairyland of Sligo and its lake isles. In *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) and *In the Seven Woods* (1904), Yeats demonstrates the assured mastery of an evocative style woven out of Spenser, Shelley, William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites. If it lacks in sinewy strength and precision it is only in comparison with his later style. Far from being a pastiche, however, Yeats's earlier style has a harmonious integrity that established his reputation as a lyrical poet. The symbolist and somewhat hieratic tendency was balanced by a contradictory impulse towards simple passionate speech. While his plays, performed from 1899 onwards, taught him the poetic resources of dialogue, from 1896 he spent the summers at Coole Park collecting with Lady Gregory folktales from peasant cottages. In the evening she wrote them out in dialect which exposed him to the living speech of peasants later used admirably by Synge.

What Yeats learnt most from the 'tragic generation'-Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, George Russell (AE)-was the need for painstaking, fastidious craftsmanship. In the 'nineties, the Rhymers' Club shared a hatred of dry, cerebral verse and of clearly-defined philosophies, believing in a sense of mystery and in melody. But even before bitterness on the private and public fronts had sharpened his vision, deepened his passion and tightened his style, Yeats went beyond the autotelic poetry of the

Rhymers and aesthetes to construct the heroic image of Ireland as the poets have imagined it, terrible and gay. The mask of the Celtic hero triumphant in defeat gradually changes into that of spiritual autonomy and wisdom, the magisterial shaping power of mind over circumstance confronting physical decay even as his home, the old Norman tower he had bought in 1915, was surrounded and threatened by anarchic violence. As early as 14 March 1888, in a letter to Katharine Tynan, Yeats wrote that in the process of correcting his poems he had noticed things about his poetry he had not known before, that it was 'almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world,' a poetry of 'longing and complaint, the cry of the heart against necessity.' He hoped some day to alter that and write the poetry of insight and knowledge.

43.8 'ADAM'S CURSE'

Already *In the Seven Woods* (1904) suggests a departure in Yeats's poetic career, an awareness of the actual world with its unpoetic responsibilities and political conflicts. 'Adam's Curse' remains an important instance of this stylistic evolution: it hovers between the earlier languorous idiom and rhythm and a new conversational, even witty tone disguising a sub-text of emotional yearning and disillusionment. Written in 1902, before the marriage of Maud Gonne to Major John MacBride, the whole poem is a controlled expression of Yeats's futile love for her. As her autobiography notes shrewdly, there is a link between unhappiness in love and beautiful poetry, a link in which Yeats's self-pity plays a role. But the transmutation of failure or inadequacy into poetry is more than a Romanticised self-indulgence. The very title of the poem indicates loss of innocence and idyllic happiness. In the fallen state of humanity, art as labour co-extensive with life brings together poetry, feminine beauty, and love. Each in its own way offers variations on the Yeatsian dialectic of nature and art, each is an artificial re-fashioning or idealization of life. The poem itself is a stylistic enactment of this dialectical process: the biographical self is sufficiently transformed in order for it to become available for detached examination in the mask of the courtly lover, and this love becomes visible rather like the hollow moon.

It is a conversation-poem involving Maud Gonne, her sister, Mrs. Kathleen Pilcher, and Yeats himself. Although it is addressed to Maud, the romantic conventions of intimacy are forestalled by Mrs. Pilcher's presence; moreover, Maud remains enigmatically silent and unresponsive throughout. The irony of this is heightened by the almost banal tone in which an autumnal mood is introduced ('summer's end'). Despite the elegiac tone, there is a movement away from lushness looking forward to the dry woodland paths of the autumn of 'The Wild Swans at Coole.'

Mrs. Pilcher's mild beauty and sweet, low voice (contrasted, for instance in 'Easter 1916' with Con Markiewicz's voice grown shrill in political argument) links her to femininity as the nurturing and creative principle ('On Woman'), to the beauty that is rooted in custom and ceremony ('A Prayer for My Daughter'). Maud Gonne's fiery beauty presents an alternative to this and Yeats the poet is located between the two, pulled towards both, towards involvement and withdrawal.

The talk on poetry contrasts hours of revision with a moment's thought in order to establish the paradox of living, spontaneous beauty as the product of painstaking, artificial re-fashioning of experience. As a poet Yeats was given to revising his work repeatedly. The paradox has been compared to the Renaissance notion of an art that lies in concealing art, to 'sprezzatura' or nonchalance as Castiglione had called it. It also looks forward to the timelessness that is specific to art, a theme that informs Yeats's 'Byzantium' poems. The domestic imagery of stitching and unstitching unobtrusively relates poetry to women; it also seems to anticipate that unity of the artist and the artisan that Yeats celebrated in Byzantine culture. After all, the golden bird of Byzantium is a handiwork of Grecian goldsmiths.

The second stanza offers a racy defence of poetry in a society increasingly dominated by the emerging bourgeois ideology. This new world, summed up by the bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen, was aggressively hostile to art and distrustful of the vital energies. The attitude of this 'noisy set' to the proposed Dublin art gallery invited Yeats's anger in *Responsibilities* (1914); as late as 'Lapis Lazuli' (*Last Poems*) we encounter hysterical women denouncing poets and artists for their uselessness at the time of war. This is the community that sets off the loneliness and autonomy of the artist. Withdrawn from conventionally strenuous and utilitarian obligations, the poet uses his freedom from the drudgery undergone by the housewife or the old pauper to engage in the far more challenging labour of artistic transformation. His defiant triumph is earned at the cost of self-destruction: 'Among subjective men (in all those, that is, who must spin a web out of their own bowels) the victory is an intellectual daily re-creation of all that exterior fate snatches away' (*Autobiographies*). The unremitting psychomachy--self versus anti-self-is directed towards the Unity of Being that is suggested, a little unsatisfactorily, in the articulation of sweet sounds together, and implicitly in the perfectly proportioned human body. More satisfactorily, the unity is mirrored in the poem itself, a whole composed of division. Mrs. Pilcher's witty parallel between the poet's labour and woman's, recorded in Maud's autobiography, relates feminine beauty to unity of being through the doctrine of the mask or the theatrical discipline of self-fashioning. Like the poet, woman also achieves spontaneity.

Feminine beauty with its implicit notion of the discipline of the mirror (or the mask) leads on in the fourth stanza to the lover emulating the artifice of the mask. As Yeats puts it, 'Each divines the secret self of the other, and refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life; for love also creates the Mask' (*Autobiographies*). With autobiographical poignancy Yeats talks of lovers who, in defiance of the bourgeois ethic (stanza 2) chose the mask of courtly love. His unrequited love is thus located within the custom and ceremony of an aristocratic culture. The note of detachment and self-parody suggests a transition in the poem. The mask of the sighing and bookish courtly lover ironically merges into a literary convention, studiedly archaic in its beauty like the opulently produced old books. Lofty idealization is judged now from the point of view of the everyday world and therefore dismissed as an idle trade. If Yeats extracts beauty out of futility, here we have, as it were, the reverse process at work: the troubled actual world intrudes and dialectically confronts the impulse towards autonomy.

We have here a resistance to the aestheticization of love that looks forward to the interpenetration of the purity of artistic form and unpurged, raw experience. The very mention of love draws out the emotional sub-text, the silence of which calls into question the decorums of conversation. The interpenetrating opposition is captured in the image of the moon. The approaching evening is described in a language somewhat stilted and lush. This is then questioned by a subtly unconventional use of the moon as the objectification of shrivelling bitterness which is the legacy of time. Perhaps reminiscent of Shelley's use of the moon and the shell, the symbolism suggests weariness as well as recovery, an end as well as a beginning. The recovery is manifest in the mood of unsentimental confrontation of the truth. The thought that the poet had reserved for Maud's ears alone reads like a summing-up; at the same time, there is a clear sense of waking up from a pleasant dream.

43.9 'NO SECOND TROY'

The new Yeats becomes clearly visible in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910) in which his public rhetoric and satiric control of disillusionment-anger, hatred, and bitterness in personal and public life--are in evidence. In fact, in the period 1910-14, Yeats moves away from his earlier misty symbolism and mythology to concrete, realistic detail. Yeats's style becomes more supple and economical, and Maud Gonne is here a real individual despite being identified with Helen of Troy in

terms of personal symbolism. The Trojan war, which ended with the destruction of Troy by the Greeks after a ten-year siege, began because Helen (wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta) was abducted by Paris, son of Priam, King of Troy. Her whole situation including the context of the Trojan War (on which Homer's epics are based) offer a parallel with a difference to Maud Gonne, Yeats, John MacBride and Irish nationalism. After repeatedly refusing Yeats, Maud Gonne finally married MacBride, one of the revolutionaries executed in 1916, in 1903 but was separated from him in 1906. When she appeared in the Abbey Theatre on 20 October 1906 after her divorce, the audience hissed her (see 'Against Unworthy Praise'); after this she withdrew from public life until 1918.

That kind of public reaction sums up the narrow-minded ideology of hatred that characterised the lower middle classes in particular:

> The root of it all is that the political class in Ireland-the lower-middle class from whom the patriotic associations have drawn their journalists and their leaders for the last ten years--have suffered through the cultivation of hatred as the one energy of their movement, a deprivation which is the intellectual equivalent to a certain surgical operation. Hence the shrillness of their voices. (*Autobiographies*)

Maud Gonne's revolutionary ardour becomes a kind of heroic mask tragically at odds with the dominant mercenary-prudential ethic of the age. Ironically, it is this class that she and her tribe of activists wished to influence and instigate to political violence: in 'No Second Troy,' she is shown to have 'taught to ignorant men most violent ways.' The poem places personal experience in the turmoil of Irish history and widens out to heroic myth: history becomes myth even as myth is linked to history.

Maud Gonne was always reproaching Yeats for not putting his art in the service of nationalist propaganda. After she withdrew from the more extreme I.R.B. (an Irish Secret revolutionary organisation) about the turn of the century, she introduced Yeats to Arthur Griffith of the Sinn Fein movement: she desired to keep the Irish literary movement abreast of the policies of Sinn Fein. Before her marriage Maud Gonne was increasingly involved in anti-British activities. She linked the I.R.B. with French military intelligence and offered a Boer agent in Brussels a plan to put bombs in British troopships bound for Africa. As Joseph Hone notes (*W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939*), Yeats wrote in his diary that Maud Gonne never really understood his plans, or nature or ideas: 'Then came the thought-what matter? How much of the best I have done and still do is but the attempt to explain myself to her?' That Maud did not understand him or there was a gap in communication is turned to poetic advantage by Yeats: 'If she understood I should lack a reason for writing, and one can never have too many reasons for doing what is so laborious.' While Maud had perceived that Yeats poetically thrived on his unhappiness, his own realization (see 'Words') suggests freedom from self-indulgence. With the help of the larger contexts of history and myth, Yeats forestalls the whining complaint of unhappiness that the opening line of 'No Second Troy' can degenerate into.

In spite of the disparity between twentieth-century Ireland and heroic Greece, the Trojan war relates Maud Gonne to the violence around her in terms of the Annunciation that develops in 'The Second Coming' and 'Leda and the Swan.' That from the eggs of Leda came love and war enables Yeats to locate his passion within a context of disintegration.

As Yeats saw it, on the one hand the rising middle classes were sunk in ignorance and superstitious piety; on the other hand, they were being incited to blind hatred of the English. At the deepest level, the blindness is an incapacity for honest self-examination and has a corrosive effect on the vital impulses and affections. Ireland must acquire an identity, a spiritual unity of its own before it can embark upon

political nationalism. Of course the coupling of ignorance and violence and timidity and desire may suggest Protestant-aristocratic prejudice about the Catholics. But when the courage did equal desire in the Easter uprising, Yeats paid a noble tribute to it.

The image of the little streets being hurled upon the great has been annotated in terms of the many little semi-literary and semi-political clubs and societies out of which the Sinn Fein movement grew. Yeats had indeed come to distrust and quarrel with them. But the image is a succinct evocation of the topography of political resentment and unrest in a city like Dublin: the narrow lanes and back-alleys from which anger spills out (often in processions) on to the big streets of power and privilege.

Instead of the ambivalence that enabled Yeats to comment on Irish politics from a distance, Maud Gonne's mind and beauty are described in terms of her single-minded intensity. If the modern sensibility is a divided one then her fiery commitment presents an antithesis to it. The fire image along with the noble simplicity or purity and restlessness of her mind telescopes the idea of a curious innocence untouched by obsequious clinging to conformity and the irony of its warped destructiveness. The comparison of her beauty to a tightened bow not only suggests the tensile and arched grace of her body but also the energy of stress, a taut and tense sexuality.

Yeats has written elsewhere that she looked as if she lived in an ancient civilisation and her face was that of a Greek statue. Yeats highlights her supremely lofty, almost inaccessible presence, her aristocratic mask of Olympian solitude and disdain set off against her populist politics in order to cast her in the sublime, tragic mould. The poem is a series of four questions suggesting a man's examination of himself rigorously pursued through the logic of feeling and thought.

43.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learnt about the poetic career of W.B. Yeats from 1889 to 1910. Apart from tracing his poetic development, the unit has introduced you to the function of Yeats's philosophical system and occult beliefs. His poetry is related to his embattled Irish identity and to the fundamental dichotomy of flesh and spirit. Various experiences, private and public, drew him out of an imaginative fairyland to the search for insight and knowledge.

43.11 QUESTIONS

1. Write short notes on i) the doctrine of the Mask, ii) the phases of the moon, iii) the interpenetrating gyres. (See 43.6)

2. Bring out the interrelationship of the mask, the lunar symbolism, and the gyres. (See 43.6)

3. How are magic and symbolism related in Yeats's poetry? (See 43.3)

4. What were the factors that made Yeats outgrow his yearning for escape into a land of fantasy? (See 43.4, 43.5 and 43.7)

5. Show how Yeats's choice of the aristocratic mask springs from his view of Ireland. (See 43.5 and 43.2)

6. In what way are poetry, feminine beauty, and love related to one another in 'Adam's Curse'? (See 43.8 and 43.6)

7. Bring out the significance of Troy as a symbol in 'No Second Troy.' (See 43.9 and 43.6)