

# Revival of Poetic Drama/Modern Poetic Drama/Poetic Drama in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of 20<sup>th</sup> century

(Part-1)

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Poetic drama, the genre which had its Spring and Summer in the hands of the University Wits and Shakespeare, obviously felt the Winter of barrenness in the next three centuries that followed. Some scattered attempts at poetic drama time and again were made by the Romantic poets and some Victorian poets like Tennyson and Swinburne. However, they, valuable though in quality, were of little use in the revival of this ailing genre. Coming to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, William Archer's book The Old Drama and the New almost put the death-nail to its coffin by defending Ibsen and other contemporary realistic dramatists at the expense of Yeats and his likes, who preferred the old drama of the Elizabethans. But in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century itself, there was a renaissance of imagination in reaction to the prevailing Naturalism and Realism, which, paradoxically enough and as pioneered by Eliot and Yeats, made Archer's 'new drama' old and the 'old' Elizabethan drama new.

Written wholly or mostly in verse, the poetic quality of the poetic drama is not just in the matter of linguistic text: the pictorial and expressive sensuousness of drama is exceedingly vivid in this genre. The credit for the revival of this genre in the 20<sup>th</sup> century goes to Stephen Phillips, Lascelles Abercrombie and Gordon Bottomley. While the first two experimented with the blank verse, the last looked back to the classical drama of Greece and to the Noh plays of Japan. Although Bottomley kept away from the Elizabethans and Shakespearean, his two best known plays King Lear's Wife and Gruoch deal with Shakespearean themes and are excellent in character drawing. While the former play recasts and moulds the famous Shakespearean King Lear, the latter purports to delineate the early life of Lady Macbeth.

The sensibilities associated with the Irish Literary Revival of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the **Abbey Theatre** associated with it brought together two dramatists, Yeats and J.M. Synge. Synge turned to the speech

and imagination of the Irish country folks. Though he wrote in prose, he sought a vocabulary that as non-urban and poetic, but real: a soft of Gaelicised English with a poetic cadence. His plays, Riders to the Sea, The Shadow of the Glen, The Playboy of the Western World and Deirdre of the Sorrows depict the life of the Irish peasants and fisher folk living a pristine life in the pre-industrialist age, and achieve effects of tragedy and comedy. Yeats, too, wrote dreamy plays on Irish mythology, and mixed with it a symbolic power and meaning, which English drama could not achieve for a long time after Shakespeare. The Countess Cathleen, the story of the Irish countess who sold her soul to save her people, but reached heaven after all, is languid in movement and has an oddly mixed vocabulary. Later plays like The Resurrection, Purgatory and The death of Cuchulain are based on neo-platonic and mystic themes, and are highly stylised in imitation of the Japanese Noh plays.

T.S. Eliot not only wrote the best poetic drama of his time, Murder in the Cathedral, but also held high its banners in essays like The Possibility of a Drama. In Murder in the Cathedral, he ventured for a rival of the verse idiom found in the Mediaeval Everyman. Yet, in his attempt to reflect the spirit of the modern age in the 12<sup>th</sup> century subject of the play, he mixed with the language of the “Morality Plays” the modern slang and colloquialisms, and even images from children’s party. The Family Reunion, in its rendering the theme of the furies of Greek mythology, again modulates the colloquial into the ritualistic in the later three plays The Cocktail Party, The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman, the poetic idiom is close to that of ordinary modern English. The first two plays in particular are held as comedy, but a Christian-cum-classical symbolism runs through the amusement and these plays evoke the modern frustration and sense of guilt in the characters in a balanced way.

Contemporary with Eliot, the Left-wing verse drama of W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood was a kind of a dramatized version of Left-wing pamphlets and was a disappointing movement from the literary point of view. Christopher Fry’s The Lady’s Not for Burning and A Phoenix Too Frequent restored to English comedy something of the strength of the Elizabethans, but overall they failed, due to their fashionable exhibitionism and lack of contemporary feeling. It might have been expected that perhaps a Marlowe or Shakespeare- like genius would develop the poetic drama after its revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the genre never could develop from its nascent stage in the modern period.