

Poetic Drama in the Xx Century

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the special features of 20th century poetic drama that stand out from other genres.

Poetic drama has a long and respectable history, so much so that surveys of its twentieth-century practitioners tend to begin with discussions of the parameters laid down by critics from Aristotle to Dryden. However, classical poetics is of limited relevance to modern practice: whereas the Renaissance dramatists in Britain were working within a strong tradition of verse drama, against the background of surviving classical works in verse and the native heritage of religious and morality plays, also in verse, this tradition did not persist to the present.

The revival of the poetic drama in the twentieth century is one of the most significant developments of the modern theatre. It may be remembered that towards the end of the Victorian age, the drama came to be a vehicle of social criticism and propaganda. The influence of Henrik Ibsen was strongly felt, and playwrights like G.B.

Shaw, Galsworthy and Granville Barker started to write, under his influence, realistic plays, better known as 'Problem Plays'. The poetic drama of the 20th century may be said to have arisen as a reaction to these prosaic realistic plays. It could be fruitfully revived thanks to the determined efforts of talented dramatists like W.B. Yeats, Auden and T.S. Eliot. Attempts were made by them to carry on the tradition of the poetic drama that has always been present, if not in a prominent form, since the time of William Shakespeare.

The poetic drama of the 20th century has certain features that make it distinct from other plays. It is essentially romantic in spirit. Its romantic character is marked in the preponderance of imagination. The theme, as a rule, is idealistic or symbolic. The poetic drama deals with some ideal or belief of human life, and brings it out through certain symbols. Of course, the theme may be, as in regular plays, serious matters of human life such as human hopes and dreams, ideals and visions, struggles and sufferings.

It may be noted that the Irish literary renaissance played a significant part in the revival of the

poetic drama. Irish dramatists such as Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Moore and J.M. Synge did a lot to revive the poetic drama. Of these writers, the greatest was Yeats, and his experiments in this field earned him much popularity. His plays register as strong influence of the 'Noh' drama of Japan. The influence of the Japanese drama on

Yeats heralded a complete change in the approach to English theatre. Yeats' dramas like 'The Countess Cathleen', 'The Land of Heart's Desire', and 'On Baile's Strand' were immensely popular.

In England, the tradition of the verse drama was enthusiastically carried on by playwrights like Stephen Phillips, John Masefield, John Drinkwater, Gordon Bottomley and Lascellas Abercrombie. But, it was Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral' that set the poetic drama firmly on the English stage. This play is immensely rich in its poetic intensity. It is not only a spiritual odyssey, but also a gripping masterpiece with a superb sense of atmosphere and tension.

Even after World War II, the tradition of the versedrama continued along with the development of social and realistic dramas. T.S. Eliot remained actively engaged in producing poetic dramas of great power. But, now Eliot had toned down the poetic elements, and in his later plays, poetry is almost indistinguishable from normal prose speech.

By the end of 1955, the development of the poetic drama more or less came to a halt as suddenly as it had begun. But, this does not mean that the tradition of the poetic drama is now merely a matter of the past. There is every likelihood that it may spring up at any time in the future.

According to Francis Fergusson, a poetic drama is a drama in which you "feel" the characters are poetry and were poetry before they began to speak. Thus poetry and drama are inseparable. The playwright has to create a pattern to justify the poetic quality of the play and his poetry performs a double function. First, it is an action itself, so it must do what it says. Secondly, it makes explicit what is really happening. Eliot in his plays has solved the problem regarding language, content and versification. In the twentieth century, the inter-war period was an age suited to the poetic drama. There was a revival and some of the poets like W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot tried their hands in writing of poetic plays. This was a reaction against prose plays of G. B. Shaw, Galsworthy and others because these plays showed a certain lack of emotional touch with the moral issue of the age. W. B. Yeats did not like this harsh criticism of the liberal idea of the nineteenth century at the hands of dramatists like G. B. Shaw. So he thought the drama of ideas was a failure to grasp the reality of the age. On the other hand, the drama of entertainment (artificial comedy) was becoming dry and uninteresting. It was under these circumstances that the modern playwrights like T. S. Eliot, J.M. Synge, W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and so on have made the revival the poetic drama possible.

A poetic drama is one in which poetry and drama are fused. Since the dialogue between the characters is in verse, the play becomes a combination of music, imagery, and ritual. These factors create high intensity and dramatic effect

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