

20th Century Verse Drama / Poetic Drama

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 out the same 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 verse drama 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.