

The Revival of Poetic Drama in the Modern Age



ELIOT'S CONTRIBUTION
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Prelude



- The Elizabethan age was a great age of poetic drama.
- All through the 19th century practically all the great poets, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Browning, Arnold, Tennyson, tried their hands at poetic drama, but failed to bring about a revival of this literary genre.

Prelude



- The 19th century in England, says G.S. Frazer, although rich in other kinds of literature, is weak in drama.
- Between Sheridan's *School for Scandal* and the early Comedies of Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw in the 1890s, no drama of any significance was produced.

Failure of Poetic Drama in the 19th century: Key Causes



- As Eliot puts it, at the opening of the century, there were plays written by poets who had no knowledge of the stage, or by men who knew the stage but were no poets at all.
- The 19th century verse drama failed because it was not a 'whole', it was a hotch-potch of farce, rhetoric, and melodrama.
- Besides this, the shadow of Shakespeare was always there. All verse-dramatists tried to use the traditional blank verse.
- That is why Galsworthy says, "the shadow of the man Shakespeare was across the path of all who should attempt verse drama in those days."
- Further, there was a tradition of Shakespearean scholarship, but the emphasis was laid on the study of individual scenes and passages, rather than on the plays as dramatic wholes.

The 20TH Century—Failure of the naturalistic prose drama: Causes



English poetic drama in the present century arose as a reaction to the **naturalistic prose drama of Ibsen**, Shaw and Galsworthy. By the second decade of the century, this prose drama had reached a dead end because—

- On the whole, this prose drama, in a decadent stage after the best work of Shaw, **had failed to grasp the depth, tension and complexity of contemporary life.**
- It was a **mere entertainment and did not maintain any high levels.**
- It concerned itself **entirely with social and economic problems to the entire exclusion of deeper and more fundamental issues.**
- It aimed at **photographic realism, avoided the romantic and the poetic, and had grown too intellectual and sophisticated.**
- It appealed **to the mind rather than to the heart.**

Result: The Rise of Poetic Drama



- A number of writers, who had made their first reputation as poets, and not as dramatists, **tried to revive the tradition of verse play** for the “Little Theatre”, i.e. theatre for specialised audiences.

The 20th century: The first poetic-play



- *Herod* by Stephen Phillips
- Appeared in 1901.
- It marks **the beginning** of the revival of poetic drama in the 20th century.

Other Great Names



- Irish dramatists, like **W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, Sean O'Casey**, also played a significant part in the moment for the revival of verse play.
- Other great names in the revival movement are **John Masefield, Christopher Isherwood, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Christopher Fry**.

T. S. Eliot



- It is T.S. Eliot who, both through his **theory and practice of poetic drama**, has achieved considerable success in establishing tradition of poetic plays in the 20th century.

Eliot's Contribution



1. Creation of Suitable Atmosphere

- Eliot took to writing plays comparatively late in his career.
- He had a full understanding of the nature of poetic drama.
- Through his critical writings, he **tried to demolish many of the misconceptions** about verse drama.
- He **emphasised its superiority over prose drama.**

In this way Eliot created a favourable atmosphere.

Eliot's contribution...contd.



2. Solved the Thematic Problem

- First, it must be realised that the difference between prose drama and verse drama is not merely one of **medium**.
- The **themes** of the two are, and must be **different**. Poetic drama has been thought fit only for such themes as cannot be appropriately dealt with by the naturalistic prose drama. **T.S. Eliot** writes, “.....no play should be written in verse for which prose is dramatically adequate”.

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- The dramatic adequacy then demands a poignant theme, involving symbolic characters with imaginative atmosphere.
- This means a **fall back** on the **elemental, emotional realities of life** in contradistinction to the socio-economic issues which constitute the realm of the naturalistic prose drama.
- Through his practice, Eliot solved the thematic problem. His verse-plays **are not concerned with socio-economic problems; they are concerned not with the outer, but with the inner emotional and psychic realities.**

CONTD...



3. Evolved Suitable Medium of Communication

- ONE pre-condition for the success of a poetic play is the availability of a form of verse, the rhythms of which are closer to those of the spoken language, and which is flexible enough to be organised into the word-order of dialogue.
- Eliot succeeded in evolving a rhythm-pattern closer to the contemporary spoken language.



4. Emphasised the Functional Value of Poetry

Poetry must not be used as a mere decoration. Poetry should become a medium, and not a decoration. Poetry should serve the following purposes:

(a) Poetic images as the objective correlatives of the states of mind, poetry should help in the revelation of the personality—pattern of the characters

(b) Through poetic symbolism it should work out the implications of the theme.

(C) The scenic setting of the play should be revealed through poetic manipulations of references.

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5. Re-orientated the attitude of the audience.

- Eliot changed the convention of making the **high personages speak in verse and the low in prose.**
- A dramatist should avoid any mixture of the two—**POETRY AND PROSE.**
- In **juxtaposition** with the prose, the poetic mode of speaking **looks all the more artificial.**
- “As I have said”, writes T.S. Eliot, “people are prepared to put up with verse from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age; they should be made to hear it from people dressed like ourselves, living in houses and apartments like ours, and using telephones and motor cars and radio sets what we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated.....”

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- 6. Demolished Popular Fallacies.

Eliot, through his critical writings, demolished the fallacy that in the history of a nation there can be only one great age of poetic drama. The age of Elizabeth in England, the 5th century in Greece, and the 17th century in France, were great ages of poetic drama, and there had not been another greater age of verse plays in any of these countries. Eliot rejected such fatalistic philosophies, as he called them, and emphasized that verse is the natural language of men at moments of intense, emotional excitement. A poetic dramatist makes articulate the deeper passions of men. Besides, he emphasized, “the craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature.”

The End



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Thanks