

Modern Poetic Drama

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Modern Poetic Drama is one of the most significant developments of the first half of the 20th century. It is not a new movement. It is a revival of a form in drama which was at the height of its popularity in the Elizabethan Age and also in the Restoration Age. Despite the efforts of Romantic and Victorian Poets, there was no tradition of poetic drama at the beginning of the 20th century. However, the roles of two major poets – W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot – led to a revival of poetic drama. W.B. Yeats, who established the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, attempted to revive poetry on the stage. T.S. Eliot wrote a number of essays formulating his concept of poetic drama and giving an impetus to the production of poetic plays. A third factor leading to the emergence of poetic drama was the reaction against the realistic and naturalistic plays of Shaw and Galsworthy.

Modern Poetic drama has assumed different forms and shapes in the hands of different dramatists. Poetic dramas have been written on a variety of themes and subjects. Some plays have been written on the glorification and exaltation of religion and the church. Others deal with atheism and denunciation of God and priests. Some poetic plays are symbolic and Mystical in character and quite a large number of them have Celtic mythology and Irish life as their subjects. Some plays have oriental grandeur, while others have aesthetic enjoyment and glorification of sex-urge as their main spring. Thus, we have a wide variety of modern poetic plays.

Stephen Phillips is among the earliest practitioners of modern poetic drama. He tried to revive the old Elizabethan traditions. However, Phillips could not achieve much success. Oscar Wilde tried to give a new shape to poetic drama by making it symbolic and aesthetic. John Galsworthy wrote poetic plays on religion themes whereas Laurence Binns sought to revive the old Greek World of Romance and loveliness. John Drinkwater, in his 'The Storm' and 'The Storm', brought fresh glory to poetic drama. The dramatists of the "Celtic Revival" – W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge, too, contributed immensely to the development of poetic drama.

W.B. Yeats sincerely tried to establish poetic drama as a serious rival to realistic dramas. He used symbolism in his plays. He built up his own system of symbols and evolved almost a personal mythology. Being a poet, Yeats presented in lyrical verses the emotions of his characters. He was influenced by Japanese No plays. His plays have more lyricism and less

action. His major plays are – *The Countess Cathleen*, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, *Deirdre*, *Purgatory* and *Resurrection*. These plays have a haunting suggestiveness and give an ironic analysis of life. Their language is a combination of colloquial and ritualistic.

J.M. Synge in his *Riders to the Sea*, *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Shadow of the Glen*, showed a sure dramatic instinct and a keen insight into the motives of human nature. He had the gift of transmuting pathos and ugliness into poetry and beauty. His plays are rich in presenting pathetic thoughts in poetic language.

T.S. Eliot is undoubtedly the greatest among the modern poetic playwrights. His five plays – *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman* – contributed immensely to the revival of poetic drama. These plays are also a beautiful record of the evolution of Eliot's dramatic genius. Technically each play marks a definite and clear-cut advance over its predecessor. Eliot started with religious themes but very soon expanded his choice to include contemporary themes. Whereas *Murder in the Cathedral* is set in a remote historical period, the rest four plays have contemporary settings. Also, while in *Murder in Cathedral*, he made extensive use of chorus, and of prose passages, the rest four plays are in verse throughout, except for a few minor prose passages here and there. He chose the style and verification of the medieval morality play *Everyman*. Eliot's plots are woven round family affairs and are set within homes. His characters have a close family resemblance. His plays defy to be categorised either as tragedy or as comedy. In the opinion of A.G. George, they may better be called "Existential plays".

Christopher Fry is the only modern verse dramatist who introduced the theme of philosophy in his plays. His plays – *The lady's not for burning*, *A Phoenix Too Frequent* and *Venus Observed* show his abundant gift of words. Fry advocated verse as an appropriate medium of philosophy because it directly makes an appeal to our intuition.

The writers of poetic drama in the 20th century have been primarily poets who obviously wanted to reach a wider audience. Eliot's statement that "there is a range of sensibility that can be expressed only in dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity" is likely to remain unchallenged and bodes well for the future of poetic drama.