CHAPTER V
ON ART OF DRAMA

The literary and critical ingenuity of William Butler Yeats found expression not merely in poetry but also in heterogeneous genres including criticism and dramaturgy. His critical works provide an insight into the corpus of his multifarious interests and acuity on the various forms of literature especially drama. A philosopher, reviewer and reformist, Yeats’s foray into the arena of dramaturgy began quite early in his literary career. He conceptualized a distinctive theatre, diametrically opposite in form and content to the contemporary realistic theatre. His views and observations regarding the art of drama are most prominently expounded in his Uncollected Prose, Ideas of Good and Evil (1903), and The Cutting of an Agate (1912), Explorations and his autobiography. His dramaturgy, with its quintessential distinctive mystical perspective drew on Theosophy and Hermeneuticism, more than it did on Christianity. Unable to conform to the traditional religious beliefs, he toyed with Catholicism and Hinduism before eventually promulgating his own personal and cohesively original metaphysical philosophical system. Though A Vision expounds these ideas fully, they are also manifested quietly profoundly in his dramatic theory which illustrates his abstract ideology and rather obscure beliefs not only through words and lyrics but in the very movement and the rituals of his plays. He unabashedly loved theatre and coveted the "moments of excitement that are the dramatist’s reward" (Gardner n.pag.) and consequently strove through theatre and play-writing primarily to do for modern Ireland what Homer had done for ancient Greece. The present chapter focuses on Yeats’s dramaturgy, his craft as a dramatist, his abhorrence for the modern realistic plays, his contribution to the Abbey theatre, and the various collaborations and subsequent innovations that he recommended to augment dramatic effect.

A blend of varied trends and features of the prevalent dramatic forms shaped Yeats’s notion of what a drama should entail and his vision of an ideal and unique dramatic form. Michael Mc Ateer in his book Yeats and European Drama, asserts that Yeats looked to the ancient forms of belief [folklore, mythology and magic] in representing what he sensed were processes hidden beneath the shift towards secular rationalism and a consumer culture. Furthermore, it is symptomatic of a contemporary presumption deeply contested in the European culture of Yeats’s age; the idea of myth, magic and folklores as resources invoked in conservative resistance to liberalism, democracy and science (Mc Ateer 4).
Nevertheless he was steadfast in his belief that drama should be concerned with "heroic passions and noble diction" (UP I 193) and he saw in the austerity and vigour of the Celtic legends the potential to revitalize literature. For this very reason, he extolled those portions of Shakespearean drama which were neither melodramatic nor too close to realism. In his essay "At Stratford-on-Avon," he commended Shakespearean theatre as a theatre that has been made not to make money, but for the pleasure of making it (E&I 96). Eulogizing Shakespeare for his keen perception of the nuances of theatre, Yeats credited him with creating historical plays which have "something extravagant and superhuman, something almost mythological" (E&I 109). Likewise Maeterlinck's vision of indefinite setting and reliance on music and voice also found favour with Yeats. Moreover, he not only approved of Symons' mediation of European ideas wherein he perceived an assimilation of song, dance, mime and acting but also conceptualized a "Total Theatre" based on these notions.

With a desire to evolve an unconventional, revolutionary, highly symbolic and ritualized form of drama, distinct from the popular naturalistic drama of Ibsen, Beckett or Eliot, Yeats studied the foreign models of drama and stage. Concomitantly, he conceived of establishing a parallel "Theatre of Beauty" in London between 1901 and 1904. Cohering with certain like-minded artists and litterateurs, Yeats formed a group named "The Masquers." It comprised Florence Farr, Gordon Craig's sister Edith, Lawrence Benyon, Thomas Sturge Moore, Pamela Colmon Smith and Charles Ricketter, to name a few. They formed a society for the production of plays, masques, ballets and ceremonies which convey a sentiment of beauty (qtd. in Foster 290).

Ostensibly, Yeats led a confederacy to oppose aggressively the realistic theatre. Extremely critical of the naturalistic setting of traditional theatre since the Renaissance, Yeats advocated a non-realistic poet's theatre in which art was to reign supreme in a reconciliation of poetry, gesture, and scene (Chapman 42). Ostracizing the modern realistic portray of the trivial, the ordinary, banal, bourgeois existence, he exalted the Greek and Renaissance plays for their vastness in space, situation and scope as against Ibsen's realism which he thought was pre-occupied with psychologically diminished people holed in incarcerate domestic situations. Likewise he appreciated the artistic independence enjoyed by Scandinavian writers although he deplored their art per se. Unlike the realists, who presented merely a slice of life, Yeats advocated focusing on the internal conflict within all people and not merely the concerns of an individual. Thus for the themes of his plays, he chose universal concerns such
as the clash between the spiritual and material facets of human nature, search for immortality as in *At the Hawk’s Well*; the choice between the real world and the world of Sidhe as in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* or even the cause of nationality as in *The Countess Cathleen*. He was assisted in this enterprise by Michio Ito and Dame Ninette De Valois who helped rouse the imagination with symbolic dances to both - substitute and express subtly the inner feelings and hidden truths through visual and non-verbal expression. Yeats also subsequently used the masks designed by Edward Gordon Craig, Edmund Dulac and Hildo Van Krop as tools to popularize a novel theatre form and to revolutionize dramaturgy.

Notably, during the course of his evolving literary and critical acuity and despite the various phases of literary and dramatic developments, Yeats’s notion of what constitutes drama remained constant. For him, Drama was the “most immediately powerful form of literature, the most vivid image of life” (Ex 119) and “in the most obvious way, what all the arts are upon a last analysis” (Ex 153). Believing that the essence of life with all its complexities and convolutions could be best represented by drama, he deemed it as a medium which while retaining one’s individuality also made him part of a larger humanity, sharing with others their perceptions and aspirations. Drama, according to Yeats, also presents life purified of all extraneous matter, “purified from everything but itself” (Ex 153). He was convinced that “the dramatist must picture life in action, with an unpreoccupied mind, as the musician pictures it in sound and the sculptor in form” (154). Convinced that the social function of drama could not be didactic, Yeats posited:

In literature, it is seldom the sad book, the sad play which corrupts but rather the cheap laughter, trivial motive of books and plays which give the mind no trouble. In a decade when the comic paper and the burlesque are the only things sure to awaken enthusiasm, a grim and difficult play by its mere grimness and difficulty is a return to better tradition, it brings us a little nearer to the heroic age. (*UP I* 325)

Justifying his diversion into dramaturgy to his friends who were against his decision to venture into this genre, Yeats replied:

To me drama has been the search for more of manful energy, more of cheerful acceptance of whatever arises out of the logic of events, and for clean outline, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret. (*VP* 849)
Strange yet simple drama which could forge a bond between the actor and the audience through an impeccable performance was envisioned by Yeats as the ideal drama. To him, subjectivity and not objectivity was the hallmark of a successful drama. It was, to him, the hierarchy of those recollections which are our standards and our beacons (UP I 324), most touch a chord in the hearts of the audience and are, in fact, the touchstone to assess their value. He intended to write, stage and produce those plays which could stir the souls of the audience, transposing them into a state of ecstasy and trance. Certain that the great mass of our people, accustomed to interminable political speeches read little (CW III 410), he advocated the promotion of literature through theatrical performances. The kind of plays he visualized had to be eternally valid and perpetually connected with the archetypes or Anima Mundi - the eternal mystic force behind man. Empathic about the retention of truth and beauty in the plays, he wanted to make drama almost magical using abstract, poetic content unobstructed by the barriers of time, age and space. He sought his theatre to communicate experiences which were outside the scope of reason - experiences which evoked intimacies, ecstasies and anguish of the soul's life. A votary for brief plays, austere conventions and simplistic settings to expound complexity of thought and presentation, Yeats took inputs about the nuances of theatre and playwriting from the actors of Abbey Theatre. His passionate involvement with theatre business, management and stage direction put to test his idealized vision of a national cultural renaissance. This, in turn, inspired him to adapt his writings - critical as well as dramatic for the stage.

Yeats' perception of drama differed from that of Aristotle. While Aristotle regarded art as an imitation of life, Yeats stressed on depicting the reality of the soul, for he was convinced that we cannot see reality anywhere but in the soul itself (Ex 170). Also, mere reflection of the surfaces of life cannot serve the purpose for a playwright, because it is only by extravagance, by an emphasis far greater than that of life as we observe it, that we can crowd into a few minutes the knowledge of years (Ex 195-96). He acknowledged that Shakespeare possessed the art of not merely imitating but creating. He strongly believed that for a drama to be memorable, it needed to veil its clear perception. Elaborating on this, he recorded: If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edges of trance... (E&I 243), the plays would become more dramatic and effective.
Similarly, contrary to Aristotle’s emphasis on the importance of plot and the three unities, Yeats gave utmost importance to expressive, well furnished, abstract and symbolic speech. Here too, the dichotomy of his critical perspicacity is visible. On one hand, he promoted the symbolic verse as a medium of expression in drama; on the other hand, he advocated simple direct style of dialogue for the stage. He claimed to have abandoned the highly elaborate style of *The Wind among the Reeds* in favour of the conversational rhythm and radically simpler action in his dramas. Moreover Yeats, a self-re-inventive artist and critic, yearned for a world where art was integrated into the culture at large and where all social institutions were interwoven. In one of his articles, he campaigned for ‘legendary drama’ in a counter-reply to John Eglinton’s observation that Celtic legends cannot be taken out of their old environment and be transplanted into the world of modern sympathies. Quoting the examples of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* and Wagner’s *Ring* which had successfully contextualized old legends to modern times, Yeats asserted that Celtic legends were capable of rejuvenating literature with their austerity and vigour.

Even though Yeats claimed to imbibe ‘directness and extreme simplicity’ into his writings (Ellmann, *Masks* 140), his highly symbolic and esoteric writings made him rather vague and complex. Conscious of his own limitations, Yeats applied himself conscientiously to improve his unruly metrics, and his abstract ideology both in his dramatic writings and his critical annotations. As he gained experience in scripting, staging and revising his plays, his views regarding the concepts, techniques and vision of the revolution in dramatic art that he anticipated became more concrete. With growing age and experience, he showed greater unflagging fertility, inventiveness and maturity even in the art of dramaturgy which had been dismissed by many as rather insignificant and inconsequential.

Undoubtedly, Yeats’s critical acumen and sharp observational power lent a distinctive aura to his dramatic ideology. In fact, his critical perceptions and notions were embedded more intensely in his plays which display an array of unconventional, experimental changes which Yeats initiated to popularize his own form of drama. What is, indeed, noteworthy is that his dramaturgy had streaks of many schools. If his vision of estrangement, directed against the values of the middle class culture at the end of the 19th century, qualified him to be a major figure of European Avant-Garde theatre; his early plays such as *The Heart’s Desire* and *The Countess Cathleen* allied him with the symbolist movement, initiated by Maurice Maeterlinck. In McAteer’s view:
His association with Symbolism did not suggest an outright rejection of Ibsen’s realism or naturalism rather he was driven by a desire to extend the revolutionary impact of Naturalism beyond the model of the social criticism play. Drawing upon his knowledge of customs, beliefs and rituals, his presentation of the Irish rural life in these plays combined Naturalist and Symbolist tendencies, in which the theme of social alienation in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* was transformed by the larger vision of spiritual loss in Maeterlinck’s *The Blind*. Yeats engaged situations at once familiar and strange; familiar to Irish audiences at least, but estranged in the unsettling presences of the otherworld in performances—the fairy Child, the Demon Merchants, the Old Woman Cathleen Ni Houlihan. (McAteer 5)

Concomitantly, Yeats’s retreat to an elite theatre of art was marked by his adaptation of the Japanese Noh drama in the later plays of the Cuchulain Cycle *At the Hawk’s Well*, and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. His collaboration with Gordon Craig established his craft as anachronistic, ironically much ahead of his times. However this partnership also associated Yeats with the *Total Theatre* movements of fifties, sixties and the seventies. His plays, *The Player Queen* and *The Herne’s Egg*, were influenced by the French Surrealism, German Expressionism and the Absurdist mode of Pirandello. However, the response to Yeats’s own dramatic endeavours was rather lukewarm. The lofty emotions, beautiful yet deliberate verbose, self-consciously intellectual and even personal themes were rejected by the theatre-goers. Yeats attributed his earlier failure to the lack of appropriate language and the right aesthetics to communicate. Nevertheless, poor response from the audience did not deter Yeats from further experimentation or evaluation of the prevalent dramatic styles in the world. Hence his penultimate play *Purgatory* is a statement of his criticism of contemporary European culture which he had developed since his association with Morris at the end of 1880s. This play also has shades of expressionism inherited from Strindberg’s 1907 play, *The Ghost Sonata*.

A self-reviewer, Yeats underrated his early dramatic attempts as a dramatist as amateurish and of no significant consequence. In *Autobiographies*, too, he rues that he had surrendered [myself] to the chief temptation of the artist, creation without toil *(CW III 171)* and conceded to have derived many *workable subjects* and sources for plot and atmosphere from critical works. Censorious of his own accomplishments as a drama critic-reviewer, he had written to Horace Reynolds in December 1932:
I am glad to have read these essays of mine after so many years. I find that I am in agreement with all the generalizations, but not with the examples chosen. I praise Todhunter and others out of measure because they were symbols of generalizations and good friends to my father and myself. The articles are much better than I wrote. I was a propagandist and hated being one. It seems to me I remember almost the day and the hour when revising for some reprint of my essay upon the Celtic movement, I saw clearly the unrealities and the half-truths propaganda had involved me in and the way out. All one’s life one struggles towards reality, finding always but new veils. One knows everything in one’s mind. It is the words, children of the occasion, that betray. (UP I 34)

Apart from being a practitioner of dramatic art, Yeats undertook astute and comprehensive study of the genre and whetted his critical insight by formulating his own concepts and perceptions about drama in general and poetic drama in particular. His faith in the aestheticism of Irish culture and his wide-ranging interests in mythology, occult, the power of imagination, symbolism and Japanese theatre helped Yeats devise his critical theory, while his association with the theatre provided him with the means to dramatize it. Venturing into dramatic criticism as early as 1890, Yeats contributed articles and reviews on drama to nearly 70 American and British magazines and journals. These reviews written on diverse topics are emblematic of his cerebration and erudition and deep artistic urge which exhorted him to critically assess drama and even counsel others to help them modify and improve their craft. For instance, in a review of Todhunter’s play *A Sicilian Idyll*, Yeats was pleased with Todhunter for the latter had, at his suggestion, written the Pastoral play of shepherds and shepherdesses because people would expect them to talk poetry and move without melodrama (Au 120). He also attributed the success of the play to the fact that acting, scenery and verse were all in a perfect unity (LNI 117). To Katharine Tynan, a lyricist, he justified floating the idea of writing a miracle play on the plea that it would be a new poetic form for her and new form means a new inspiration (L 129). However, in *Bookman’s* review (1895), his perception of Wilde’s play *A Woman of No Importance* is rather disparaging. He records:

> Despite its quality, it is not a work of art, it has no central fire, it is not dramatic in any sense of the word. The reason is that the tragic and the emotional people, the people who are important to the story are conventions of the stage. (UP I 355)
Concomitantly, Yeats’ own drama can be regarded as the critique of the dramatic conventions and forms popular during his times. In fact, his dramatic theory is disseminated more profoundly not so much in his essays and introductions to his works as in his dramas. These plays not only present what Yeats envisioned as ideal, they are, in fact, statements of what he detested in the contemporary drama. These plays also exhibit all those influences from varied quarters which assimilated into his dramaturgy. In his dramatic repertoire consisting of 31 plays, Yeats included folk drama, slapstick farce and Irish myths and occult, the latter being an obsession with him which Auden lamented as the deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic. The Countess Cathleen and The Heart’s Desire stand out as remarkable works of the early phase of his dramatic output although Yeats later undertook several revisions of the plays. Appreciated for their poetic qualities and lyrical inter-breathings, the subsequent versions of the plays became more dramatic but lost on their poetic qualities. The play The Countess Cathleen is based on a simple episodic plot wherein a selfless Countess bargains her own soul in a bid to refrain demon-merchants from purchasing the souls of her starving peasants. The play, apart from being based on a Celtic pagan legend, also contains autobiographical elements - an indirect message to the nationalist firebrand Maud Gonne. The poet Kevin believes that the Countess whose chief concern ought to be family and marriage, instead of selling her soul to save the peasants, should have left the onus of their salvation on the builder of Heaven. In the subsequent revisions of the text, undertaken by Yeats in 1895, 1901, 1912 and 1919, the message for Maud Gonne gained greater momentum. However, the play met with fierce moral, religious and political opposition from Yeats’ detractors who contested that the people of Ireland would never sell their souls.

This was followed by The Shadowy Waters (1900), a symbolic play of escape in which the hero and the heroine seek death and life respectively. Jeffares posits: Through their shadows, they suggest the lovers’ contrasting dreams of love and also symbolize a love beyond this, of superhuman kind (SPL ix). Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902), a prose play, stormed the theatres with its revolutionary message of Ireland as a wronged old woman asking for time and sacrifices from the youth to help her out of misery. Later she assumes the shape of a young girl with the walk of a queen. The play’s palpable pathos, nobility and poetic grandeur are more eloquently felt in the staging of the play rather than its reading. Next play to be published was The Pot of Broth (1904), a humorous piece of Irish drama which conveys unequivocally that cleverness is alive and flourishing in Ireland. It is the story of a beggar who
tricks a provident housewife out of a meal. He offers her a stone which he claims makes a good broth, although it is the chicken which lends taste and flavor to the broth. This play was followed by a prose play \textit{The Hour Glass} (1903). A morality play of death inspired by 	extit{Everyman}, it is about a man of science who gives up his agnosticism just when he has only an hour to live. In his dying moment, he embraces belief in the divine people.

Exploring yet another legendary theme, Yeats' play \textit{On Baile’s Strand} (1903) is based on Cuchulain’s slaying of his own son. It also embodies Yeats' own desire for a son and some of the abstract ideas personified by the blind man and the fool who are shadows of Conchubar and Cuchulain. The tragedy is all the more dramatic and ironic because the blind man and the fool could have prevented the tragedy but they would not because the fight would give them a chance to rob the houses of those watching it. In the play \textit{The King’s Threshold} (1904), Yeats vindicates the right of a poet in Ireland’s heroic age to occupy high, esteemed position in the king’s court. He wrote this play at a time when he was being accused of caring for his own craft more than Ireland. Thus through the play Yeats not only vindicates his stand that a poet is as important to society as a man of action, but also that poetry cultivated for its own sake is as important as that for the nation.

\textit{Deirdre} (1907) retells the legend of Deirdre and Naoise. The Protagonists are archetypal figures caught in circumstances of tragic inevitability and the action reaches its climax in Deirdre’s ritualized suicide. Other plays of prominence include \textit{At the Hawk’s Well} (1917) and \textit{The Only Jealousy of Emer} (1919). \textit{At the Hawk’s Well} symbolizes man’s search for the unobtainable, the Hawk suggesting the persecution of the abstract, and Cuchulain the contradictory nature of carnage. \textit{Calvary} (1921), in Professor Ure’s words, is a play of four variations on the theme of Christ’s powerlessness to save those who can live without salvation (\textit{SPL} xvi). Likewise \textit{Purgatory} (1939) presents the antithesis of youth and old age and again raises the question of the elimination of descent at the hands of the ancestor, a theme which Yeats had already dealt in \textit{On Baile’s Strand}. The crime in \textit{Purgatory} can be regarded as the dramatic manifestation of man’s bitterness in the face of his destiny. \textit{The Death of Cuchulain} (1939) which Yeats wrote towards the end of his life is a tale of the degeneration of a hero who does not die in a battle but is slain ironically for a paltry reward by a blind man. In this play, Yeats appears to have called all his characters together, as if to say, as Hellmann puts it: “Here is the universe that I have created, peopled and made as real as anything in the world” (qtd. in Sands n. pg.). Rather than the hero finding glory at the end of
the play, Cuchulain seems to fight with his death and is envisioned by the dramatist to have secured his place in the folk memory of the Irish Tradition. Thus the action of most of his dramas is centrifugal and delves deep into human psyche to explore the subconscious, so as to explicate the internal drama of existence, leading to vision and self-revelation.

As a dramatist, Yeats yoked together with subtlety various and often diverse elements to form a unified whole. Quite convincingly, he used functional and not merely decorative poetry to rejuvenate drama. And though not the first to use symbolism in his plays, he is famed for his free, deliberate and functional use of symbols as well. Sensitive to the oft changing tastes and preferences of the public, he realized the futility of writing in a listless vein on conventional themes. Inspiration from O'Leary coupled with his own growing passion for his nation led Yeats to explore Gaelic literature for befitting subjects and forms to further the cause of nationalism. *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) confirmed his shift to a more purposeful drama. His unrequited love for Maud Gonne and his realization that he had to prove himself worthy of her through *The Countess Cathleen* inspired him to write this verse drama. With this play, the pretty fantasies of Yeats' earlier plays gave way to highly symbolic and suggestive alluring plays far from reality. The former external conflict as in the early plays like *The Countess Cathleen*, also paved way for the spiritual and intellectual subtlety which marked his later plays. Preferring short plays, he did not have much sympathy for longer plays. The hallmark of his dramatic writings has, indeed, been the blend of profound complexity with a Spartan simplicity and brevity.

An offshoot of his indisputable erudition and insatiable passion for drama, Yeats' acumen as a critic of drama was rooted in his eclectic and recondite reading of world literature and his own critical fecundity. An avid reader, Yeats had read voraciously not only the works of American and British dramatists but also imbibed the valuable and congenial elements of Sanskrit drama including William Monier's translation of *Shakuntala* written, as Yeats puts it, in *that other Ireland* as also the Japanese Noh drama. Yeats' dramatic theory also underscored his belief in an essential relationship between religion and drama. He earnestly desired to yoke together art and religion, particularly drama and religion. In this context, George M. Harper observes:

The more religious the subject-matter of an art, the more will it be as it were, stationery, and more ancient will be the emotion that it arouses and the circumstances
that he calls up before our eyes. Such arguments for art or religious are the basis of Yeats's symbolic aesthetics. (Harper Mingling 17)

Analogous to this has been his endeavour in the theatre to master the critical relationship between poetry, speech and the discipline of the theatrical sense (Au 469). For Yeats, drama was a medium through which he could assimilate the aristocratic and highly conceptualized art of the symbolists with the legendary and mystical Irish folk tales and myths, and their quintessential suggestiveness and supernaturalism. He intended to use symbolic scenery and allegorical characters to achieve two goals - to revive the ancient Irish culture, and to mobilize and nationalize the masses. He was convinced that as a means of unifying and marshalling people, nationalism operated more like a religion. He envisioned Irish nationalism to be as potent as religion in swaying and mobilizing masses for a cause. He observed: "There is no feeling except religious feeling, which moves masses of men so powerfully as national feeling (UP II 140).

Perceiving in theatre the potential to help give Ireland a hardly and shapely national character (Ex 76), Yeats envisioned forging of a particular kind of national unity through drama as comparable to the organic oneness of a single mind. Optimistic about replicating the social development of Scandinavia, France and Germany, he tried to foster Unity of Being and Unity of Culture by using theatre as a potential means to awaken and vitalize the masses. He hoped to recreate an Irish literature which though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind (CW III 204-5). In his Memoires, he records:

All creation requires one mind to make and one mind for enjoyment, the theatre can at rare moment create one mind for an hour or so, but this grows always more difficult. Once created it is like the mind of an individual in solitude, immeasurably bold - all is possible to it. (CW III 383)

Largely instrumental in founding a national theatre to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature with the support of Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, George Moore, the Fays, Annie Honniman and others, Yeats conceived of it as a platform to define an emergent nation. Yeats's Irish theatre played a great role in countering the British representation of the Irish as barbarians without culture. Driven by the objective to promote Irish culture and arouse nationalist sentiments amongst the audience, it invited especially those playwrights who served the cause of nationality. Apparently, opposed to literature
being used as a vehicle for political propaganda, he promoted art-theatre that would be above politics, national but not chauvinist or parochial. Even in his Nobel lecture, he asserted:

The danger of art and literature comes today from the tyranny and persuasions of revolutionary societies and forms of political and religious propaganda. (n. pag.)

Yeats’s interest in establishing an Irish literary theatre was also promoted by two other factors. First, the rejection of many of his plays by the English Theatre and second by the urge to have freedom to experiment which theatres of England denied. Yet, by 1916, he had become disillusioned by events such as the riots at *The Playboy*, and the audience indifference to the art legacy of Hugh Lane who was instrumental in establishing Dublin’s Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, the first modern art gallery in the world. Moved by the bloody turn of events in Ireland, Yeats’s literary output reflected the unrest and the commotion in Ireland in poems like Easter 1916 and symbolically presented the cause in plays like *The Countess Cathleen*. His oft quoted line *Did that play of mine send out/certain men the English shot?* (*The Man and The Echo*) is universally seen as a comment on his leaning towards the Irish cause.

Moreover, the collection *The Irish Dramatic Movement* while documenting Yeats’s dramatic ideology, also expounds his contribution to the conception, initiation and fruition of the Irish Literary theatre, later renamed *The Abbey*. Yeats envisioned the establishment of Abbey theatre, a unique enterprise with amateur actors, and non-dramatist playwrights to produce plays against the backdrop of Irish folklores instead of popular realism. The pioneers of the Abbey Theatre- Yeats, Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn were motivated by a dual desire to educate people to a higher aesthetic standard and to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland (qtd. in Marcus 68), although Mrs Gregory’s account of their intention in *Our Irish Theatre* seems rather preposterous:

We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by the passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England and without which no new movement in art and literature can succeed. We are confident of the support of the Irish people, who were weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us. (Gregory 20)
Thus although the avowed motive behind establishing Abbey Theatre was to raise the conscience of the Irish nation rather than using it for patriotic polemics, yet paradoxically, with its foundation in the reformist movement of England and overtly strong affiliation with the Irish national cause, the Irish Theatre could not be anything else but political. Nevertheless, it soon became an integral part of the general literary, cultural and political renaissance in Ireland. Yeats also used Ireland and the Irish cause to serve his own literary schema. He romanticized, mythologized and idealized Ireland, its people and their cause and recreated the worlds of the heroic legends, with the belief that such mystical forces acted on human life. In fact, he wrote 5 plays loosely based on the stories of Cuchulainn the mythological hero of the ancient Ireland who symbolised all that was noble, great and virtuous in Irish character. Yeats earnestly desired to create for Ireland an image mask (rather than the mirror) of the antithetical self of the modern Ireland and to authentically present the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland. As Flannery observes:

In play after play he [Yeats] sought to rid Ireland of the sentimentality by challenging her, as he challenged himself, with all that by nature he [sic] was not (17)

Hence effectively displaying a definite anti-colonial, nationalist rhetoric in his artistic and critical oeuvre, Yeats rejected the English cultural hegemony, and in order to rediscover the national spirit, he out rightly dismissed misrepresentation and stereotyping of Ireland. He believed that literature could have a revolutionary impact on Ireland and therefore campaigned for morality plays - symbolic and decorative, with no realistic and elaborate settings to be produced in the Abbey Theatre.

Holding contemporary theatre, dominated as it was by realism, to be a commercial venture, Yeats derided it for being full of compromises and replete with insincere idealism. He denounced commercial realistic drama of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Shaw for stifling the imagination so that the mind might sleep in peace (E&I 169). Yeats looked down upon the photographing of life by the realists on the English stage. He lamented the trend among the contemporary dramatists of fiddling with the old theatrical conventions. His stringently anti-realistic theory of the theatre was based on the contention that drama was essentially conventional, artificial, ceremonious (Ex 172). To him innovative, experimental drama seemed an antidote to the artificiality of the commercial, realistic contemporary drama. As early as 1906, Yeats had realized that too much emphasis on ordinary life could rob drama of
its appeal and beauty. He patronized plays cut off from life on the premise that only thus poetic utterances as a natural form of expression could be evolved. Unlike Ibsen, Strindberg or O’Casey, Yeats was least interested in portraying the humanity of the dispirited trivialities of the modern world. Of the many limitations of contemporary realistic plays, what Yeats found most disconcerting was that most actors spoke on the stage as if they were reading from the newspapers (E&I 168). For this very reason, Swinburne’s Locrine was debunked by Yeats for the inability of the actors to speak poetry properly:

é not one rhythm, not one cry of passion was spoken with a musical emphasis seems but an artificial and cumbersome way of saying what can be said naturally and simply in prose (E&I 168-69).

In various essays, Yeats reiterated that the description of the details of the ordinary life could hamper or limit the tragic passion on stage. In an open letter to August Gregory written in 1919, he has defined passion as the straining of one’s being against some obstacles that obstructs its unity (Ex 252). In David Richman’s view: ÓYeats singled out John Galsworthy’s urban tragedy Justice to highlight what was wrong with the new drama of external circumstances Ó over simplification of human life, characterization of external kind Ó human life being dominated by vast play of circumstance (Richman 30). Yeats held commercialism and Puritanism in England responsible for the dwindling interest of the audience in drama. Certain that the two dimensional realism and classical myths were not sustainable for the stage; he felt that the legendary framework of plot from folklores and mythology to be the only viable option to popularize theatre. A simplistic drama, Yeats believed, could elevate the soul of the audience. Ironically, although he had sought to create a simplistic national theatre, yet his spiritualism and mysticism made his drama and poems exotic and him an elitist. Moreover, since Yeats’s form of drama had a strait-jacket agenda, it was alienated from the popular theatre and the audience in general.

Conspicuously Yeats, the literary critic, appreciated and reproached other writers candidly and often in tandem. This element of dichotomy in perception was often visible in the dialectical natural of his critical ideas. For instance, while lauding Oscar Wilde, the ‘excellent talker’ for being equipped with ideological and philosophical critical patterns, he also regarded him an ‘imperfect artist’. He censured the latter for his inability to fuse together poetry and drama, the two elements vital for making drama a living art. Conversely,
he valued Wilde’s perception of the Mask as expressed in his essay Shakespeare and Stage Costumes which was later re-named The Truths of Masks and reprinted in Intentions. Yeats’ theory of the poetic Masks was a take from Wilde concept which he developed in Estrangement, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, and the essays on Synge. He disapproved of the depiction of inorganic, logical, straightness and not the crooked road of life (Au 283) in Shaw’s The Arms and the Man but added that Shaw was perhaps the first Englishman to make the great discovery that it is possible to write with great effect without music, without style (Au 283). Concurrently, Yeats’ dramatic ideology was reminiscent of that of Maeterlinck, a Belgian playwright and essayist whose work The Treasure of the Humble embodied his faith that in future souls would communicate with one another without the intermediary of senses (Mc Ateer 42). Both admired Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonism although Maeterlinck was greatly disturbed by the crudity and primitiveness of the themes of the plays in the public theatres. In his essay, Ideas of Good and Evil Yeats echoed Maeterlinck’s aversion to the public theatre as the place where beauty is extinguished in the banal externalities of scenery and acting and quotes his arraignment of primitive emotion (qtd. in New York Times pdf). Moreover, both agreed on the imminent advent of the age of anti-realistic symbolic art. Maeterlinck plays, inspired by the Egyptian mysticism, had a pivotal role in shaping Yeats’ vision about stage craft especially when he began to use the screens devised by Craig. His assessment of Maeterlinck was also ambivalent. While crediting him for proposing the notion of Static Drama and praising him in a letter to Olivia Shakespear as being of immense value as a force helping people to understand a more ideal drama (L 255), Yeats found him lacking the definiteness of the great mystics which was abundantly found in Blake. Yeats also denigrated Maeterlinck for the absence of ceaseless reverie about life which we call wisdom which Yeats perceived in Robert Bridge. The Return of Ulysses which he called as our new drama of wisdom (E&I 199). He also observed that unlike the contemporary drama which excited only the nerves, it was full of that earthly excitement which has wisdom for fruit (E&I 200).

Similarly, though Yeats apparently dismissed the works of realistic playwrights, he shared empathy with many of them. For instance, he found definite affinity with August Strindberg as both of them had a lifelong interest in esoteric mysticism and the likelihood of thought transference. In The Bounty of Sweden, Yeats has drawn parallels between the Scandinavian theatre and the Irish dramatic movement. Likewise influence of Ibsen on Yeats attempted revival of the pre-realist aesthetics in drama and the subsequent emergence of the
Irish modernist tradition cannot be negated. Yeats’s relation with Ibsen was also ambivalent. His remarks on him vary from sincere admiration to equally earnest distaste for the latter’s penchant for realism. He hailed Ibsen as a romantic nationalist and a role model for the Irish playwrights but was dismissive of his works for depending on little minute effects. Thus Yeats criticized *The Doll’s House* on the premise that art is not the same as nature. In his *Autobiography*, Yeats has downgraded Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* as a trivial play mainly because it lacked music and poetry. He indicts it for using dialogues so close to the modern educated speech, that music and style were impossible (Au 279). Conversely, inspired by Ibsen, Yeats regarded Symbolism as an extension of the revolutionary element of naturalism and Norway as a model of intellectual and cultural naturalism (McAteer, 42). Irina Ruppo Malone in *Ibsen and Irish Revival* reveals the inherent confusion in Yeats’s contribution to Irish Ibsenism. By piecing together Yeats’s writings on Ibsen, Malone asserts that Yeats’s contradiction grew from the audience response at an Ibsen production, and from criticism of the Abbey theatre. She also highlights Yeats’s revulsion towards joyless and pallid words (42). Ultimately, Yeats’s rejection of Ibsen resulted from a lack of poetic sensibility in Ibsen which Yeats discerned in abundance in Shakespeare and Sophocles.

Likewise Yeats sought inspiration from William Morris to concretize his theories about revitalizing and transforming theatre. It was Morris who had convinced Yeats to make the actors in verse drama chant the verses. Yeats’s passion for verse drama stemmed from his love for William Morris’s poetry in which he discovered the beauty of blank verse. Moreover, he favoured verse drama for its quintessential ability to stir the soul, a quality which he found profoundly deficient in the modern drama. Yeats was convinced that the prevalent dramatic forms like melodrama or farce could arouse extreme emotions such as tears or laughter but they were incapable of sustaining lasting emotions or impact, once the play was over. He termed them mere excitements and not influences which in turn, made them lack meaning. In fact, Yeats was certain that revival and rejuvenation of drama could be possible only through functional and not merely decorative poetry as a medium of drama. Instrumental in reviving modern poetic drama as opposed to the commercial popular prose drama, Yeats’s preference for it was based on the contention that a fine poetic drama lifts us into a world of knowledge and beauty and serenity while common drama of murder and sentiment only flatters us. We identify with the hero and triumph with him on his soon gained conquest on evil (LNI 113). Lamenting the unpopularity of verse drama in the modern times, he held commercialization and utilitarianism responsible for the decline of poetry in drama.
The London audience, he felt, could only appreciate the commonplace sentiments uttered in words which have at the very best no merit but the successful mimicry of the trivial and the unbeautiful phraseology of the streets and the tea-table (LNI 217). He even desired the scenery of poetic drama to be an accompaniment and not the reflection of the text.

As part of his ground-breaking ingenuity, Yeats collaborated with Edward Gordon Craig in devising novice use of stage space. He found highly original staging concepts and acting theories similar to his own theatrical vision in the latter’s theatrical magazine *Mask*. He was especially taken in by Craig’s concept of Uber marionette, a type of acting illustrated in Craig’s essay *The Actor and Uber marionette* (The Mask, 1908). For Craig, a set designer, artist and a revolutionary of theatre, it was a symbol of ideal actor. He used it as a strategic weapon against modern realistic or naturalistic drama. As opposed to the realistic theatre, Craig proposed the creation of an actor less theatre, in which Uber Marionette would replace the living actor. Uber marionette, according to Craig, is free from the idea of reproducing nature as also the servitude of the actor’s weaknesses who merely tries to imitate nature. Yeats saw in this concept an equivalent of his own notion of mask and the anti-self. Craig’s idea of the actor as the visual symbol coincided with Yeats’ rejection of the commercial theatre, a theatre shackled, in his mind, to the contest of character with character (E&I 227). He conceptualized a stage in which the scenery took a backstage and the actor did not exhibit his personality as an individual contrary to the conventional theatre. Craig also combined with this idea other staging experiments with lighting, masks and mannequins. His masks and monochromatic folding screens were adopted by Yeats in the revisions of *The Hour Glass* and proved crucial to his future poetic dramas. Yeats also transformed his language accordingly to suit his preferred genre and his dramatic intent. Under Craig’s influence, the imagery of his plays became the imagery of perception (Dorn 124) and his decision to revise some plays was prompted by the chance to restage them in Craig’s new scenery and this new use of stage space anticipated Yeats’ adaptations, several years later, of the Japanese Noh Drama (Dorn 109).

His endeavours to revive poetic drama was also furthered by his association with Florence Farr, whose production of John Tod Hunter’s *A Sicilian Idyll* was a revelation to Yeats in terms of not only Farr’s acting capabilities and her incomparable verse delivery but also the possibility of reviving the ancient art of minstrelsy. In *Autobiographies*, he wrote: made through these performances a close friend and a discovery that was to influence my
life (Au 73). For the next 22 years, Yeats and Farr collaborated to revive lyrical, narrative and dramatic verse. In A General Introduction for My Plays, Yeats avers that unlike the vaguely mediaeval Countess Cathleen” written in Blank Verse, heroic subjects such as Deirdre and Cuchulain, four Heroic Age went better or so I fancied, in ballad meter of The Green Helmet (E&I 523). He justified his choice by affirming When I speak blank verse and analyse my feelings, I stand at a moment of history when instinct, its traditional songs and dance, its general agreement is of past (E&I 524). Thus driven by a bardic instinct, Yeats tried to revive the lost art of speaking and chanting to the musical notes. His chief concern was to get it spoken with some sense of rhythm. He entrusted Florence Farr with the responsibility of training the actors in rhythmical speech and chanting. In an interview to Daily Express of April 1899, she echoed Yeats’ sentiments:

One of the greatest difficulties we have had is to find actors who can recite verse properly. Since the introduction of prose plays and the natural style of acting that art has almost disappeared. When poetic drama was the inevitable form, actors were as much orators as actors. It is not, of course, the old style of declamation that we want, but when verse is spoken as prose it is intolerable. But when verse, I mean, of course, blank verse, is properly spoken, it has the charm altogether independent of its meaning. (Daily Express 5)

Lecturing on the Ideal Theatre to the Irish literary Society on 23 April 1899, Yeats asserted that our actors must become rhapsodists again and keep the rhythm of the verse as the first of their endeavours (UP I 176). Earlier, in January 1899, he had written to the editor of The Daily Chronicle: We have forgotten that the drama began in the chanted ode, and that whenever it has been great it has been written certainly to delight our eyes, but to delight our ears more than our eyes (CL 2 349). However, Yeats’ efforts at versification of The Countess Cathleen to be staged at Dublin were met with resistance by George Moore, a founding director of Irish Literary Theatre. He ordered replacement of both Farr as a manager, and Dorothy Paget with Emery as the main lead, much to the dismay of Yeats. Nevertheless, Yeats’ method of chanting of the lyrics found vehement approval from James Joyce who saw in it the reflection of his own internal drama. According to Richard Ellmann, Its feverish discontent and promise of carefree exile were to enter his own thoughts, and not long afterwards he set the poem to music and praised it as the best lyric in the world (Ellmann, Joyce 67). Joseph Holloway was also enraptured by the beauty of the play The
Countess Cathleen. He recounted how as the play progressed, a spiritual, half mystic, visionary sensation crept over my senses as if I were in a fairy land (Holloway 7). Yeats never approved of the usual stage methods of pathos and manner and expression to move the audience, preferring the beauty of speech to accomplish this task. In order to prepare the uninstructed audience regarding his experimentation in chanting and rhyming of dialogues, Yeats had printed two lyrics from the play separately in the programme, explaining therein that they are not to be sung, but spoken or rather chanted to music, as the old poems were probably chanted by bards and rhapsodists. Yeats avers:

Even when the words of a song, sung in the ordinary way, are heard at all, their own proper rhythm and emphasis are lost, or partly lost, in the rhythm and emphasis of the music. A lyric which is spoken or chanted to music should, upon the other hand, reveal its meaning, and its rhythm so become indissoluble in the memory. The speaking of the words, whether to music or not, is, however, so perfectly among the lost arts that it will take a long time before our actors, no matter how willing, will be able to forget the ordinary methods of the stage or to perfect a new method. (CW VIII 144-5)

In this context, in Samhain, 1903, Yeats advocates:

We must get rid of everything that is restless, everything that draws the attention away from the sound of the voice, or from the few moments of intense expression, whether that expression is through the voice or hands. (CW VIII 27)

This led Yeats to extol Greek dramas and actors for the predominance of voice in their acting. He also realized that ...modern acting may be great when it does everything with voice and movement. But an art which smothers these things with bad painting, with innumerable garish colours, with continual restless mimicries of the surface of life, is an art of fading humanity, a decaying art. (28)

In his endeavour to revive and revitalize modern poetic drama, Yeats found an ally in T. S. Eliot. Both envisioned poetic drama as the medium which could enforce spiritual discipline on to the spectators. They also desired to liberate it from the fetters of Elizabethan imitations and to save it from the clutches of growing commercialization of drama wherein actors demanded greater autonomy in staging, acting and profits. However, Yeats and Eliot differed diametrically in their approach and treatment of themes. While Yeats adopted the
Irish folklores and drew inspiration from the Noh plays to write short musical plays; Eliot began as a religious dramatist but soon turned to social comedy with spiritual and psychological overtures. Thus from writing religious verse drama such as *Murder in the Cathedral*, he moved on to write secular conversational comedies with sharp social criticism in plays such as *The Cocktail Party, The Confidential Clerk* and *The family Union*. Though, initially, he had relied upon religious drama and adopted varied stylistic devices to achieve dramatic excellence, later he redefined the conventional classical themes to suit the modern materialistic ideology. To incorporate social realism, Eliot tried to make his poetic drama resemble common prose by repealing it of all music and colour. Yeats, on the other hand, espoused ritual and magical elements in his poetic drama to captivate the audience. Susan Gorsky explains his goal:

Poetic drama held an exalted position for him: it could (if properly approached by playwright and audience) recapture hidden or forgotten truths, reawaken its audience to the dignity and value of the past heroic world, remind its spectators of basic and unchanging values that is, drama could and should renew a faith which man (especially his contemporary countrymen) had lost (165)

Revitalization of poetic drama, Yeats believed, could be accomplished only by incorporating three features: sensuous and melodious diction, Irish themes to arouse artistic conscience and a pertinent structure which could marshal the Irish fragmentary beauties into great literature. He extolled Villiers De Lôsle Adam for writing in elevated prose, bearing a definite semblance to poetry. Yeats also deemed his work *Axel* as symbolic of the return of imagination and poetry to drama. Being a critic, Yeats tried to incorporate all these elements in his own writings to pragmatically lend greater eminence and value to drama as a genre of literature. Consequently, his poetic plays rejected the realistic mode of presentation in vogue in his times and adopted the subjective, non-realistic form. With an intention to widen the scope of imagination which had been banished from the realistic drama, he used Irelandôs rich cultural treasure with its tales of fairies and supernatural elements. His ritual intimate theatre carried on the spirit of the Aesthetic movement in an attempt to intensify the viewerôs imagination and perception by means of music, dance and stylistic acting. Such ritualized enactment not only isolated the play from the real world but also aided in transferring the delicate concepts and images formed in the poetôs mind to the audience enabling them to
pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for [our] habitation (E&I 225).

Realizing that the locus of dramaturgy was indeed the audience response, Yeats re-envisioned drama. To write for hearers who had to understand swiftly or not at all, Yeats had to purge his drama of his earlier mode of lyrical writing which had given his early lyrics a substantial yet dreamy and languid charm. To achieve this end, he learnt the nuances of dramatic construction and radically revised his poetic style. He undertook revisions and re-writing of plays during rehearsals and after performances to enhance their dramatic effect and poetic content, thereby giving his actions a meaningful coherence and his speeches the authentic tone of individual human voices (Pierce II 401). Thus by 1906, Yeats had adapted to the re-writing of his plays after performance to purge them of the superficiality and to enhance their dramatic effect:

I have written a good many plays in verse and prose, and almost all those plays I have rewritten after performance, sometimes again and again, and every re-writing has been an addition to the masculine element, an increase of strength in the bony structure. (PC 187)

In his collection of essays, The Cutting of Agate (1903-1915), Yeats suggests some innovative and ingenious path-breaking stage craft conventions which could help simplify dramaturgy. He recommended doing away with scenery and incorporating suggestive make-up which eliminated the need of using other props. For instance, he imagined that the sun burnt faces of the musicians would suggest that they have wandered from village to village (E&I 221). Yeats recommended alteration in the stage conventions especially those of elaborate, decorative scene-painting sceneries which he considered sheer obstacles to the communication of the true significance of drama especially in the Shakespearean drama. He also recommended altering the shape of the contemporary Shakespearean stage into a half-closed, fan-shaped theatre with the actors occupying its narrow ends and the spectators fanning out to its broad ends. Similarly he claimed: I have simplified scenery, having The Hour Glass, for instance, played now before green curtains, now among those admirable ivory-coloured screens invented by Gordon Craig (E&I 222). Yeats sought to include: instead of the players working themselves into a violence of passion indecorous in our sitting-room, the music, the beauty of the form and the voice all come to climax in
pantomimic dance (221). Yeats also wanted *Plays for Dancers* to be staged in small, intimate space such as drawing rooms with minimum of scenery so that its few properties can be packed up in a box or hung upon the wall where they will be fine ornaments (223). This simplicity was intended at creating greater intimacy in terms of space and proximity and a closer encounter with the language and the human body.

Believing that drama originates among the common people, Yeats insisted on the use of the colloquial language. He also regarded musical instruments subservient to human voice and hence deplored any competition between the human voice and orchestra. He posited that the human voice can also become louder by becoming less articulate, by discovering some new musical sort of roar or scream — the voice must be freed from this competition and find itself among little instruments only heard at their best, perhaps when we are close about them (223). Besides he wanted the music, the beauty of the form and voice all to come to a climax in the pantomimic voice (221). Yeats' suggestive amendments were aimed at achieving greater intimacy: one realized anew, at every separating strangeness, that the measure of all art greatness can be but in their intimacy (CW IV 165).

Although not a dramatist in league with the likes of Shaw, Synge, O'Casey and Wilde, Yeats mastered the art of dramatic dialogue. He used it as an effective tool to voice the inward debate of the self or to articulate diagonally opposite viewpoints and contradictions in his poetic ideology. Yeats' attempts at simplification were not motivated by economy alone. It was also driven by an urge to give voice its due in the stage craft by holding gesture secondary to speech upon the stage. He proposed changes in lighting as well. To avoid artificiality on stage, he recommended disuse of studied lights and footlights. For him, the most effective lighting was the lighting we are accustomed to in our rooms. He did not approve of Craig's coloured lights on the stage which were distracting as they weakened the focus on the actor. According to him:

> We should rather desire, for all but exceptional moments, an even, shadowless light, like that of noon, and it may be that a light reflected out of mirrors will give us what we need. (*Ex 179*)

A study of his essay *The Theatre* depicts Yeats' critical acumen which originally appeared in *The Dome* (1899) and was later reprinted in *Beltaine* and *The Ideas of Good and Evil*. Embedded in the text of this essay is a paradox, for while advocating writing for the
coterie, Yeats expects drama to refine the taste of the multitude. For him, drama was a medium through which he could assimilate the aristocratic and highly conceptualized art of the symbolists with the legendary and mystical Irish folk tales and myths and their quintessential suggestiveness and supernaturalism. He intended to use symbolic scenery and allegorical characters. For instance to show a forest he recommended the use of a forest pattern rather than a forest painting. This type of staging he felt would be fairly cheap, novel and convenient. He attempted to concretize the revolutionary concepts regarding stage craft, direction, production and acting through his own plays. Yeats rued the fact that unlike Shakespearean times, the modern audience was not in contact with poetry which he tried to revive by using poetic drama, verse masks and Noh plays. He asserts:

Shakespeare’s art was public, now resounding and exclamatory, now lyrical and subtle, but always public, because poetry was a part of the general life of the people who had been trained by the church to listen to difficult words and who sang, instead of the songs of the music-halls, many songs that are still beautiful... We must recognize the change as the painters did when, finding no longer palaces and churches to decorate, they made framed pictures to hang upon a wall. Whatever we lose in mass and in power, we should recover in elegance and subtlety. (VP I 417)

Ironically, this argument should have warned Yeats against the use and the consequential failure of poetic drama to attract or mesmerize the public. The modern spectators were indeed unrelenting in their rejection, much to his disappointment. Even, his attempt at presenting avant-garde theatre to a select audience was rebuffed by the spectators. His intention to make the text subservient to the eastern ritual drama and his efforts to give prominence to poetry and music made them rather obscure and vague. In fact, his most original contribution—his musicians presented the most problematic aspect of the performance. Their drum beat, cloth folding convention and ritualized movements perplexed the audience who were used to the realistic drama. Although, Yeats tried to overcome these problems in his subsequent revisions of the plays, undeniably, the viewers:

however prepared they were for the new form, they were still in the London of 1916, conditioned by realistic theatre which although artificial or threatening in its style of presentation was more nearly a reflection of the taste of the age than was Yeats’s involved investigation of a deep and exotic inner concept of beauty which had little if any relationship to everyday life. (Miller 228)
Moreover, Yeats' notion of audience response and participation in the drama revolved around the sharing of common experience with the fellow spectators. Drama, according to Yeats, should be able to unite the individual memory to common passions as embodied in the memory of the race in order to attract the audience to the theatres. For this very reason, he regarded Wilde, Shaw and Moore "abstract, isolated minds, without memory or landscape," (VPL 834) for they failed to unite the two. With the intention to promote affinity with the audience, Yeats sought to restore and revive the magnificence of speech and dialogues over-elaborate realistic stage designs and needless gestures and stage conventions. He rued the fact that the London audience could appreciate only the commonplace sentiments uttered in words which have at the very best no merit but the successful mimicry of the trivial and the unbeautiful phraseology of the streets and the tea-tables (LNI 217). Conversely, he intended to promote "magical" drama which could stir the soul of the audience and lift them to a state of trance with its abstract, poetic content; unobstructed by the barrier of time and place. He wanted theatre to communicate experiences which were outside the scope of reason, experiences which evoked as he put it, intimacies, ecstasies and anguish of the soul. He was averse to the clear and logical construction (E&I 215) of modern drama adopted from the French on the premise that it lacked the emotion of multitude (215).

Referring to Todhunter's A Sicilian Idyll, he maintains that his pleasure of the play was magnified by the pleasure of those about him (E&I 165). However, his pleasure dwindled when he saw the play in a London theatre with a multitude of people with no shared experiences. This contention is further established in his essay The Return of Ulysses where he avers that the delight in poetry cannot be perfect when we read it alone in our rooms (E&I 199) and that it might be perfected in the theatre, when we share them friend with friend, lover with beloved (199). The same idea is echoed in The Theatre where he asserts that the delights of poetry are magnified when we hear it sitting friend by friend, lover by lover (168). Greek drama, according to Yeats, derived the emotion of multitude from its chorus (215) while Shakespearean drama got it out of the sub-plot which copies the main plot, which sets our mind imagining other shadows, shadow beyond shadow, till it has pictured the world (215). In Ibsen and Maeterlinck, he felt that the vague symbols provided the mind wandering from idea to idea, emotion to emotion (216).
However, despite his repeated avowals about the rapport which must be built between the playwright and the audience, "from the start Yeats’ relationship with the audience was rather ambiguous at best and often outright antagonistic. Yeats declared a war on the public audience (Putzel, 107). Chagrined by the lukewarm response to the Abbey theatre shows, Yeats took up the challenge of evolving an aristocratic drama to be performed not to a large audience but to a select few who could comprehend and appreciate his esoteric art. To draw a sympathetic and receptive audience for his unique and off-beat experiments, Yeats had arranged for these plays to be performed at a friend’s drawing room. Thus preferring to establish "strange intimacy as against the "familiar distance" evolved by the contemporary naturalistic production of drama, Yeats had asserted in 1917:

I need a theatre. I believe myself to be a dramatist. I desire to show events and not merely tell them. Two of my friends [Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa] were won for me by my plays, and I seem to myself most alive at the moment when a room full of people shares the one lofty emotion. (qtd. in Sands, pdf)

Grimly elitist at times, and in contradiction to his previous assertion, Yeats even recorded:

I want to create for myself a theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many. (Ex 254)

The gradual development of Yeats’ own arcane critical ideology, steeped in occult and folklore, and his hostility to the contemporary trends and expectations of the audience, alienated him from the public and vice versa. Quite ironically, although a campaigner for theatre for the commoners, Yeats became disenchanted with the Irish public and distanced himself from the theatre after the furious denunciation of Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World in 1907. His plays such as On Baile’s Strand, At The Hawk’s Well, The Only Jealousy Of Emer and Purgatory display a writer’s private vision who has grown totally disenchanted with his culture. The hostility which Yeats faced after the production of The King’s Threshold impelled him to take up James Joyce’s advice to ignore the agenda of nationalism and to concentrate on formulating and realizing a visionary drama based on heroic Celtic past. Yeats wrote a series of ritualized poetic dramas based on an idealized reality, away from present into a truly heroic past and the legends of Ireland. Unlike Sean O’Casey, who dramatized modern Ireland and its conflicts and exposed the sham of nationalist patriotism in Juno and the Paycock, Yeats chose to adapt for the stage the “Irish Heroic Age” with a hope
to forge a bond between the poet/playwright and the uncorrupted, pristine imagination of the peasants.

Another concept on which Yeats deliberated for long in many of his essays, letters and lectures was to establish a distinction between Personality and Character and to enumerate the inherent difficulties in presenting the personality on the modern stage, besieged as it was with conventions and traditions which hindered it. Describing in Memoirs the kind of personality needed for his lyric drama and poetry, Yeats observes: “This personality (alas to me only possible in my writings) must be always gracious and simple. It must have that slight separation from immediate interests which makes charm possible while remaining near enough for fire (Mem 142). Yeats also attempted to differentiate personality from character in a letter to his father, Yeats wrote thus:

Juliet has personality; her nurse has character. I look upon personality as the individual form of our passion. I probably get the distinction from the stage where we say a man is a “character actor” meaning that he builds up a part out of observation or we say that he is “an emotional actor” meaning that he builds it up out of himself. And in this last case we always add, if he is not common place, that he has personality. (L 549)

In fact, the protagonist in Cathleen Ni Houlihan with her individualistic passion, her uniqueness in terms of speech, language and demeanour is a befitting example of what Yeats meant by personality. As Yeats clarified in the prefatory notes to the play, Cathleen was not built up merely out of observation. Like the “actor of personality” whom he described to his father, this figure also was a product of his own self. Even Maud Gonne had, while rehearsing for the role, realized that she could not play the part by observation or the conventional modes of theatrical expressions suggested by George Moore. She exemplified “personality” as she sat in the rocking chair, crooning songs of sacrifice and memories of the bygone times while the Gillane family represented what Yeats terms “Character.” Yeats approved of Craig’s belief that an actor is a visual symbol who interferes in the play with his intrusive personality and not by his presence.

The staging of The Hour Glass, a morality play, marks the beginning of his movement to turn drama into pure poetry. An allegory, like Everyman, the play uses abstract symbolism and characters representing ideas but it differed from the medieval allegory in the presence
of irony, derived from play on the meaning of wisdom and folly (Philips 6). According to Morrow, Yeats strived towards creating a ritual that touched on the depths of human experience. In order to do so, he needed to remove his plays from the everyday without sacrificing the drama (Morrow 171). Though his efforts to affect ecstasy by dramatic and theatrical means often invited the displeasure of the critics who regarded his plays nothing more than esoteric poems, Yeats remained unfazed by such criticism.

However, Yeats boldest experimentation in theatre came in 1916 when he was introduced to the Japanese Noh plays by Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenellosa's translations. In search of new ways of exploring the occult research through literature, Yeats was completely besotted by the mysterious elegance and beauty of the Japanese Noh Plays. The Noh plays have been compared to the greatest of Greek tragedies for their evocative, powerful poetry and splendour of emotional intensity. He was excited to hear that the Japanese Noh plays were full of spirits and masks, and that the crisis of the plays usually occurred when a character who had appeared to be an ordinary mortal was suddenly revealed to be a God or spirit (Ellmann 216). Yeats seized on it as a way of combining verse, ritual, music and dance in association with action in a manner clearly akin to the symbolist ideal of the complex interrelation of the arts (Encyclopedia 832). However, he did not conceive of producing a replica of this Japanese form. He conjured up a new form, similar in spirit to the Noh plays using the rather imperfect knowledge he had gathered about this art form. Thus though inspired by Noh plays, Yeats did not imitate them. He modified them to suit the western audience and his own highly developed and advanced dramatic system. For instance, he used an unchanging backdrop in as early as The Hour Glass. However, his art did become purposely esoteric under the influence of Craig and the Japanese Noh plays.

The exploration and his adaptation of the elegance and mystique of the Noh plays to suit his own poetics opened up the possibilities of a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, having no need of mob or press to pay its way—an aristocratic form (E&I 221). Originating in Japan these plays were actually performed by vagabonds, a group of bottom scale entertainers who travelled from one village to another with their troupe performing mostly magic tricks, acrobatics, and juggling and at times substantiating their performances with sacred rituals or spiritual dances. The Noh plays were characterized by masks and music; dance, formalized movements and rhythmic speaking. It comprised action lasting thirty minutes to an hour and a half performed by the main actor Shile, his companion
a counterpart of Shite is a chorus made up of six to eight people and two or three stage assistants named Koken. Noh plays are also characterised by a special feature wherein the Noh actors are males who use stylized voice tones-high pitched for women and low and guttural for old man and perform these roles so deftly that there is hardly any iota of disbelief on the part of the audience. Hence the apathetic, enigmatic voice of the actors, the musicians and the chorus in his Noh plays added to the tragic vision of the plays.

The study of Noh Plays forms an integral part of Yeats' dramatic criticism because for him these plays became the yardstick against which he measured all other contemporary plays and found faults with them for lacking the quintessential subtlety, mysticism and unpredictability which was abundantly found in Noh plays. What fascinated Yeats most was that the stage of the Noh plays was almost bare, barring a simple image of a pine tree against a plain backdrop. A sense of illusion and absurdity was created by the use of masks or make up which camouflages the characters completely. These devices served to create a sense of simplicity, impersonality and profundity in symbolism and also illusionary ideal beauty. The actors danced in a stylized manner covering the entire stage and to create an atmosphere of intensity and spiritual fervour, they spoke in a haunting chant. The Noh actors scorned imitation, representation and realism as mere theatricality and suggested idealized action through formal gesture, ritualized movements, and universal action. Yeats wished a similar enchanting and enriching atmosphere to be recreated in his own plays and in contemporary drama in general. His initial flush of excitement resulted in his adaptation of Noh plays in the writing of the first series of Dance plays.

At the Hawks’ Well thus explicitly uses dance, masks and the mystical element inspired from this art form. In his notes to the play, Yeats avers: Painted scenery is unnecessary because our imagination kept living by art can imagine mountains covered with thorns- trees in drawing room without trouble (Hakuyani 17). Adopting a Noh principle, the play begins with the musicians unfolding a black cloth and chanting and ends with the refolding of the cloth. The ritual of unfolding and refolding the cloth creates an atmosphere of subtle strangeness and the chanting adds eeriness and mystery to the ambiance. The Noh plays convention which allows the subconscious to wander in the realm outside reality so that two things normally contradictory to each other may co-exist finds its manifestation in The Death of Cuchulain, a dance play which was one of Yeats final works. It is a tale not of a hero glorious feat but his degeneration. This fruitless pursuit is actually a dance which
suggests the journey of two opposing forces in a graceful and counterpoising movement. The final dance at the climax thus is crucial to the moral fibre of the play for here all major conflicts and contrary forces are resolved in a rhythmic movement.

However, Yeats faced both frustration and resistance in transforming his envisioned drama into reality on stage. The main reason was that the actors were not receptive to the drastic changes which Yeats wanted to initiate. He often voiced his frustration with the limitations of his actors and their inability to translate his vision of a performance into an actual performance (Putzel 113). Timing and the range of movement being crucial to Noh actors, Yeats began to provide specific instructions to control physical movements and other minute details regarding the language, cadence, oration and music on stage. His play *At the Hawk’s Well* displays the use of many Noh techniques and those adopted from Craig. In *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, Yeats remarked about the characteristics of the style of acting in the Noh drama.

The players wear masks and found their movements upon those of puppets: the most famous of all Japanese dramatists composed entirely for puppets. A swift or a slow movement and a long or a short stillness, and then another movement. They sing as much as they speak and there is a chorus which describes the scene and interprets their thoughts and never becomes as in the Greek theatre a part of the action. At the climax instead of the disordered passion of nature, there is a dance, a series of positions and movements which may represent a battle, or a marriage, or the pain of a ghost in the Buddhist purgatory. (*E&I* 226)

From the Noh Plays, Yeats adopted and adapted basic, symbolic and unrealistic scenery; small musical instruments to accompany the action onstage; a chorus which made a *poetical comment* on the play while remaining outside the action and the carrying of the mind *beyond what action exhibits to the core of the spiritual meaning* (Fenollosa, 69). Yeats also espoused a dialogic process between reality and illusion, the living and the dead, artifice and nature, a quintessential feature of Japanese Noh plays. The slow, attenuated yet intense movements and the associated fusion of time and space in the dance in the Noh plays captivated Yeats. Dance, he was convinced could convey those *intuitive perceptions* that could not be comprehended otherwise. Thus his *Four Plays for the Dancers* (1921) stand out as fascinating plays in which the dances were integrally woven into the texture of the plays. These plays combined with dexterity music, dance, ritualistic movements and masks to create
innovative, splendid dramas and incorporated dance, not merely as peripheral devices but as a non-verbal development of the central action, integral to the play.

The use of masks which Yeats espoused in his plays is vital also because they had been adopted on Craig’s insistence who firmly believed that the advantage of mask over a face is that it is always repeating unerringly the poetic fancy (Quoted in Miller 163). As such, Yeats also posits in the preface to *At the Hawk’s Well*:

The face of the speaker should be as much a work of art as the lines that he speaks or the costume that he wears, that all may be as artificial as possible. Perhaps in the end, one would write plays for certain masks. The mask, apart from its beauty, may suggest new situations at a moment when the odd ones seem exhausted. (*VPL* 1305)

Moreover, Yeats devoted himself to developing a *persona* - a concept taken from classical Greek term *Per and Sona*, or the theatrical mask through which the sound (*sona*) of the actor’s voice was amplified. This heroic persona was based on occult and classical Greek and Celtic mythologies. The masks were used by Yeats as a vehicle to initiate subtlety and to lend cadence to the dialogues on stage and to introduce poetry on the stage, in imitation of the Greek and Shakespearean era as opposed to the prose of the realistic plays. Besides as an item for contemplation, Yeats wished to have masks which were “images of these profound emotions that exist only in solitude and in silence” (Ishibashi 133). Elucidating the concept of yeatsian masks, Hiro Ishibashi, in a 1963 talk at the Yeats Summer School in Sligo, remarked:

The choice of mask [in traditional Noh] determines the type of character and it can determine the nature of the play itself. A mask is not a supernatural disguise, but a temporary transformation. Yeats was concerned with the power to transcend human traits and create an intimacy between audience and players. He also believed in the mask as a symbol of events and emotions created by the artist. (154)

Yeats used masks variously as dramatic personae by introducing different voices in his narration. He introduced a detached, anti-theatrical voice to counterbalance, contradict and sometimes deflate his earlier heroic vision and to intensify the irony and the audacity of the tone. The masks coupled with the apathetic, enigmatic voice of the musicians and the chorus in his Noh plays added to the tragic vision of the plays. Since, Yeats believed: “All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance once chosen, must be firmly held
against a pushing world. Verse, ritual, music, and dance in association with action require that gesture, costume, facial expression, stage arrangement must help in keeping the door (E&I 224). He made use of the masked protagonist to maintain requisite distance from the audience. In this regard, Susan Valeria Smith observes: Yeats believed that the mask not only established an appropriate distance between audience and stage, it also focused audience attention because it was an unalterable sculptured image fixing the universal dramatic conflict and resisting individual emotional response (56). Yeats used the Fool's mask and the Angel mask designed by Craig in The Hour Glass; a mask for the Blind Man in On Baile’s Strand and two for both Cuchulain and The Old man in At the Hawk’s Well. The latter are a sort of mirror images of both, separated only in time and experience. Yeats was convinced that apart from providing artistic distance, the mask also elevated the masker by lifting him above the human, realistic and mundane realm. In 1922, Sculptor Hildo Van Krop designed the masks for the play The Only Jealousy of Emer which were more angular, more abstract, and more primitive than the previous one. On a similar plane, Yeats used the Gaelic Tales which were merely folktales until he masked them and elevated them to a mythical stature. Thus in Calvary, Yeats uses the masks to lend the characters a symbolic identity. Participating in a ritual, they also attain a historical, mythological and legendary significance. Christ, in particular, is a symbol of the church and the focus of its annual rituals. Hence Yeats hoped that Cuchulain wearing this noble, half Greek, half Asiatic face, will appear as an image seen in reverie by some orphic worshipper. I hope to have attained distance from life which can make credible, strange events, elaborate words (E&I 221). In fact, in the preface to Four Plays for Dancers, Yeats had wished for a time when the masks created for Four Plays for Dancers might by their philosophical vitality inspire other plays (vi).

Implicit in the wearing and viewing of a mask is the dialogue between what is seen and what is hidden. In October 1910, Yeats had written an essay for Edward Gordon Craig's journal, The Mask. The Tragic Theatre was concerned not with philosophical concepts but with dramatic conventions of formalism and intimacy through symbolic scenery, dance and masks. He preferred the actualities of visual effects and movement to abstract beliefs. In Noh, objects are infused with intense emotions. He wished to have masks which were images of these profound emotions that exist only in solitude and in silence (Ishibashi 133). The use of masks also stemmed from the concept of making the actors exhibit symbolist ideas rather than their personality. In his introduction to Certain Noble Plays of Japan, Yeats justifies his use of masks in the plays:
A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some common place player, or for
that face repainted to suit his own vulgar fancy, the fine invention of a sculptor, and to
bring the audience close enough to the play to hear every inflection of the voice. A mask
never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art; nor
shall we lose by stilling the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by a
movement of the whole body. (E&I 226)

Delighted with the discovery of masks, Yeats had written to Lady Gregory of his
intentions: ‘I should also like the Abbey to be the first modern theatre to use the mask. (Letters 554). He employed the five types of symbolic Noh masks -those of Gods, men, women, the insane and the demons. These are used by Yeats in a ritualistic context- as one of the devices to create his remote, spiritual and ideal theatre. Thus the Noh plays and Craig’s unconventional modes to achieve greater abstraction and symbolism were adopted to augment the effect of experimental drama and to limit realism in his plays. However, Craig and Yeats had their share of disagreements on a number of artistic issues culminating in their disassociation in 1916. Thereafter, at the recommendation of Ezra Pound, Yeats employed Dulac, a musician, illustrator and painter, to produce his play At the Hawk’s Well. Dulac created racially indeterminate masks (part Japanese, part Greek, part Egyptian [to] gradually draw the audience out of its own historicity, away from the familiar themes and into the strange world of the play (Putzel 113). He also designed the costumes, played as a musician and later wrote the musical score for Yeats’ Four Plays for Dancers (1921).

Moreover, continual experimentation with innovative designs set apart Yeats’ craft
from those of his contemporaries. Shunning naturalistic drama, Yeats concentrated on
writing, producing and staging plays which could excite the imagination rather than the mind
to communicate experiences which were outside the scope of reason. Yeats adopted a
minimalistic, symbolic and economical stage craft for two main reasons. He did so not only
because ideologically his drama was opposed to the popular naturalistic drama being staged
in England and Ireland but also because the stage at the Abbey theatre was rather too small
and un-equipped to handle the demands of the traditional, naturalist stage design. In one of
his essays in Explorations, Yeats had called himself the advocate of poetry against the
actor (177). Next to poetry, he wished to give ample space to imagination in the plays and
advocated embedding mystery and ingenuity into the plays meant for the Irish stage. Yeats
also used the contrivance of juxtaposing contrary points of views as in On Bailey’s Strand, to
create a series of fervent debates among these different personae. This device helped him to express unequivocally strong yet opposite points of view through distinct dramatic characters. He presented these opposing and contradictory views with passionate conviction without the obligation of making definitive choices between the extremely opposite notions apart from allowing him to remain in suspended vacillation between two contradictory stances without making his works vague, ambiguous or perplexing. According to Karen Dorn:

By the time, Yeats had experimented enough to realize the reasons for his failures in popular drama, he had come to understand what he needed to do. As he gradually incorporated minimalist staging fit for an intimate setting, distancing devices such as masks, methodical movement, stylized music and the culminating in symbolic dance, he elevated his incantatory verse and archetypal themes, turning drama into poetry. The result was at once abstract and intimate, the spiritual experience he had envisioned. (Dorn 22)

These experiments and modifications in dramaturgy can be read as dramatization of Yeats’own critical ideology. He not only recommended and envisioned a unique yet simpler dramatic form but also realized them into concrete form by elucidating his theories and tenets through his dramas to test their effectiveness and feasibility. Thus thematically indicative of Yeats’ growing spiritual alienation, the plays like *The King’s Threshold* and *Deirdre* are regarded as treatments of the relation of the artist to society against the backdrop of an overbearing regulatory authority of the state. Moreover, writing for the theatre also served as an antidote for Yeats’early effeminate lyricism. He was aware of the intemperance of ‘soft aestheticism’ and feminism of his work of the nineties and sought to pursue a more masculine style. Partly due to his stylistic failure, Yeats forged a new style infused with ‘lean and sinewy power’ of his mature verse abandoning the early florid, languorous cadences to meet the demands of the stage. It also gave him the vigour and concreteness to discard the ‘cloud and foam’ of the Celtic Twilight and the Aestheticism of 90s. As part of his commitment to become a serious dramatist, in 1901 Yeats even went on to study Shakespeare. The subsequent revisions of *The Countess Cathleen* amply exhibit his literary journey from lyrical effeminacy to masculine strength.
At the opening of Abbey, Yeats had written \textit{I have but one art that of speech} (Ex 218) yet, throughout his career in the theatre, Yeats sought to master the critical relationship between poetry, speech, acting and the discipline of the theatrical sense (Au 469). This tension between the poetic text and its performance is dramatized by Yeats\textquotesingle most challenging plays, the \textit{Four Plays for Dancers}. According to William B. Worthen \textit{Far from being theatre less drama, Yeats\textquotesingle play break the realistic subordination of verbal to scenic representation and opens a far fetching investigation of how the language of the text can be inscribed in the practices of the stage} (109). However, in his early essay, \textit{The Play, The Player and The Scene}, Yeats had conceded: \textit{I have been the advocate of the poetry as against the actor but I am an advocate of actor as against the scenery} (Ex 177). Thus Yeats\textquotesingle early plays subordinate other theatrical enunciators-acting, gestures, movement, lighting, scene design- to speech.

A comprehensive study of Yeats\textquotesingle dramaturgy reveals the inherent dichotomy in his critical reviews pertaining to this genre too. Yeats had set out by launching his own Irish company of amateur actors under the direction of Frank and William Fay. Initially, the performances by the company and the subsequent theatre artists had enchanted the critics and the audience alike with their freshness and novelty. An urbane English critic Alfred Walkley had lauded the Irish theatre for its \textit{lack of theatrical bag of tricks} (Walkley 315). Similarly, Max Beerbohm had concluded that \textit{the blank faces and stiff movements of the Irish actors were part of a conscious inexpressiveness somehow appropriate to the spirituality and intellectually superior Keltic [sic] race} (403). Michael Mc Ateer also had extolled Yeats thus: \textit{His use of space, shadow and light to the end of Static Theatre, the vocal delivery demanded by the psaltery experiment, and the later use of dance and mask, together contributed to the creation of a Theatre of Art} (6). But this euphoria faded soon and Yeats became the target of much criticism. While the jury at the Noble Foundation acknowledged his achievements in re-inventing poetic drama and modernizing and reforming the stage, there are critics who have decried Yeats\textquotesingle attempts at reviving an obsolete art form. Still others regard his plays to be over ambitious in experimentation and too ahead of his times to be accepted by the audience. Reviewing the first show of \textit{The Heart\textquotesingle s Desire} in 1894, The \textit{Daily Chronicle} lauded it for its \textit{freshness and simplicity} and for separating the play from \textit{the dismal category of Pseudo- Elizabethan blank-verse dramas}, meanwhile The \textit{Bookman Review} categorically pointed out that \textit{the contemporary theatre was not ready to accommodate the kind of experiment it involved} (Daily Chronicle, 24 April 1894).
Yeats' poetic drama confounded the critics by ensconcing poetical utterances, with masks, symbols, ritual and formal stylization and remote association to depict a world of fantasy. Indubitably, his poeticality subjugates the dramatic features such as dramatic action, movement and characterization but fails to blend these elements with music and symbolism which takes a toll on the emotional and human appeal of the plays. In his book *Passionate Action*, David Richman describes Yeats' relationship with theatre as a struggle for mastery against a form and set of conventions that he both adored and loathed. A poet at heart, Yeats' drama shares many of the linguistic and literary features of his poetry but his self-consciousness and humour less aesthetics smothered the delicate emotion and lightness (qtd. in Gardner n.pag.).

Undeniably, this long drawn association with dramatics finally led Yeats to create the "Theatre of Art" by initiating experimentation in the use of space, shadow and light, the vocal delivery as part of the psaltery experiment and the use of dance, allegory, mask and apocalyptic symbols. In an attempt to simplify drama, he advocated obliterating it of all distracting features such as shrill music, elaborate stage settings and even the actor's expressions in favour of more poetic possibilities of stage pictures and language. Insisting on immediacy, he reiterated *We should distrust bodily distance, mechanism and loud noise* (E&I 225). For a drama to be effective and memorable for the audience, Yeats regarded elaborate stage settings, over bearing background sceneries not only distracting but also superfluous. He wanted these elements to be subservient to the actor and the dialogues. Primacy of language and the art of dialogue delivery coupled with the aura of the actor were reiterated throughout by Yeats.

However, the critics have been divided on the vital issue of the reception of the innovations as initiated by Yeats in his dramas. In fact, his contriving experimentations in prose and poetic drama have invited more of criticism than appreciation and concomitantly, his reputation as a poet has overshadowed his attempts on stage. In fact, his plays have been dismissed as too antiquated yet too experimental. At best, they have been regarded as esoteric poems, an ancillary to his poetics. Yeats' effort to affect ecstasy by dramatic and theatrical means has been side-lined on the pretext that they are too locus-specific, being based on Celtic mythology and legends. Amongst those who were rather vitriolic about Yeats dramatic finesse is Yvor Winters who questioned Yeats' cogency and legitimacy in adopting historical tone. Winters were certain that it was merely a medium adopted to beguile the audience.
Even in the 20th century, Yeats received mixed response from the critics. Eric Bentley felt that the kind of drama Yeats was writing might lead an audience to lose interest in life itself. Similarly, Richard Taylor in his study of Yeats’ Noh plays indicted Yeats for working with “outmoded material” which bore no relevance to “modern outlook.” He was also charged with slavishly aping the ritual style of Noh theatre and for deliberately rendering his drama opaque and inert. Thus, despite being embedded with lofty emotions and cerebral visions, his plays weren’t well received during his life time and are rarely performed today. With hardly any presence outside Dublin, Yeats’ plays have disappeared from the Abbey Theatre repertoire as well. Although he influenced playwrights like Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, the present day studies regard Yeats’ foray into dramatic form as of limited significance. It is previewed only from the point of view of understanding and assessing Yeats as a poet. Denis Donoghue regards it as “anticipating the more assured achievement of Beckett” in the coming times whereas Bernard O’Donoghue claims that Yeats’ plays were “bedevilled by uncertainty as to precisely the kind of theatre he envisaged” (qtd. in Howes, 111-12). In this context, Shelley Sharp Dirst avers:

By the time Yeats had experimented enough to realize the reasons for his failure in popular drama, he had come to understand what he needed to do. As he gradually incorporated minimalist staging fit for an intimate setting, distancer devices such as masks, methodical movement, stylized music and the culminating in symbolic dance, he elevated his incantatory verse and archetypal themes turning drama into poetry. The result was at once abstract and intimate, the spiritual experience he has envisioned. (132)

Nevertheless, despite controversies and adverse criticism, Yeats remained focused on the writing, amending and staging of the plays. However, it is his contradictory and contrasting views which baffle the critics. The very premise of Yeats’ theatrical endeavor is marked by a basic conflict: Yeats’ desire to move “the mass of people,” and the realization that in the present state of mind the masses can hardly be receptive to the kind of theatre he supported or created. His inconsistent and incongruous observations regarding stage conventions also drew flak from all quarters. To begin with, there are contradictions in the tenets of the Abbey Theatre itself. To be accepted by it, a play needed to contain “criticism of life, be based on Irishness,” sans any political allegiance and the consequential
controversies. Nevertheless, inherently a play could not be possible without a conflict or disagreement and hence controversies could not be avoided. Interestingly, many of the plays especially by Yeats and Synge which were staged on the Abbey were mired in controversy. In fact, the uproar over Synge's plays hardened Yeats' opinion about the capacity of popular audience for appreciating good art, and his various struggles over the theatre made him particularly hostile to artists and actors he perceived as pandering to popular tastes or propaganda (Howes 8). The change in perception and defeat of initial idealist view of drama was quite contrary to his ideology before he stepped into dramaturgy because from establishing a democratic drama he had shifted his focus to establish an 'elite' theatre.

His essays and articles are replete with instances where he presents divergent and often disparate viewpoints. Probably, he mulled over issues time and again resulting in a change of thought, may be undiscerning to Yeats himself. From writing verse of a certain texture and tone, he altered his original ambition to writing dramatic verse suitable for the stage. Correspondingly, although in 1901, Yeats had written with evident satisfaction that his style was himself, two years later he lamented the difficulty of developing a 'sense of style' that would allow the treatment of human thoughts and feelings ranging the gamut of Hamlet and Falstaff (Parkinson 74). Also, the attitude underlying Yeats' early plays is radically opposed to the final plays. The positive determinism and celebration of Nietzschean–romance reflective of the dramatist's perspective in the earlier plays gives way to pessimism and nihilism in the last plays. Thus contrary to the equation of death with a state of happiness, much superior to life in the earlier plays, the focus in the later plays shifts to the after-life, tormented by the painful past as in Purgatory and At The Hawk's Well.

With the evolution of his theatre, Yeats approach also changed, his claim that 'my aim is directness and simplicity' is refuted by his own endeavours to write and produce highly symbolic and mystical plays based on Celtic folklores with which the common theatre goers were not familiar. These plays seemed obscure and dreary to them and were therefore rather unpopular. Similarly, on one hand, he asserted the need to maintain distance between the performer and the spectators, and achieved it with the use of symbols and masks in his plays, paradoxically, on the other hand, he held the artificial lighting and the stage setting responsible for demolishing intimacy. In Certain Noble Plays of Japan, he says 'The stage-opening, the powerful light and shade, the number of feet between myself and the players have destroyed intimacy' and further adds that 'mechanical inventions have destroyed
Intimacy by making human voice and human body seem less expressive (E&I 222). Further, he condemns footlights as laborious and professional and a hindrance to strike a rapport between the actor and the spectators. He avers: It is well to be close enough to an artist to feel for him a personal liking, close enough perhaps to feel that our liking is returned (E&I 224). To achieve greater intimacy, his stage instructions for At the Hawk’s Well clearly suggest breaking of the fourth wall, limiting the number of the audience, shrinking the size of the stage, reducing the mechanical barriers between the actors and the audience, and making the audience sit on three sides of the stage to dilute the barrier between the actor and the audience. In fact, his idea of minimalistic stage conventions, reducing the stage to a bare space before a wall instead of a formal stage and use of a square blue cloth to represent a well in At the Hawk’s Well were all targeted at making drama more intimate and popular.

Although Yeats perceived of drama as a medium which could unite people and promote nationalism, he wanted it to cater to only a few who could really appreciate and value it. Similarly while he emphasized that Abbey was apolitical and did not intend to entertain political propaganda or parochial agenda, the fact that it invited playwrights to serve the cause of nationalism by presenting plays on the issue exposes the hypocrisy of his earlier claims. Ironically, in contrast to the prior preference for intimacy, he later wanted drama to maintain distance from experience and life. He pronounced categorically: All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance, once chosen must be firmly held against a pushing world (E&I 224). He used verse, ritual, music and dance as a tactic to achieve this aloofness which he relates to the Anima Mundi. In Certain Noble Plays of Japan, Yeats records:

[in] some arts the images and symbols chosen can enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had been too subtle for our habitation. As the deep of the mind can only be approached through what is most human, most delicate, we should distrust bodily distance, mechanism, and loud noise. (E&I 224)

The stage craft was further modified by the use of folding screens which necessitated the alterations in language for the stage. Hence from using blank verse in the vaguely medieval The Countess Cathleen, Yeats shifted to ballad meter (E&I 523-25) in heroic plays such as Deirdre and Cuchulain. Originally, Yeats theatrical research had focused on decorative scene design and costuming. He professes thus:
...we staged the play with a very pronounced colour-scheme and I have noticed that the more obviously decorative is the scene and costuming of any play, the more it is lifted out of time and space, and nearer to fairyland do we carry it. (qtd. by Robinson, *Dramatist* 75-76)

Thus though earlier he had promoted the use of decorative and symbolic scenery (*E&I* 177-8), in the new drama inspired by the Japanese Noh, he asserts: “there will be no scenery.” (221). He wanted scenery to be simple and unobtrusive, preferably in monochrome so as to harmonize with the essence of the play and highlight the characters and their profiles in clear and sharp terms. Michael McAteer observes: “If his experiments with voice, movement and staging appeared at times over ambitious, it was testament in part to the scale of what he sought to achieve. Dismissing his entire theatrical achievements as anachronistically idealist, however presents in some measure a failure of criticism to grasp the visionary power of that ideal so pertinent to an age of secular and religious fanaticism and all-encompassing consumerism (6). Thus dichotomies abound in Yeats’ dramatic intellect.

Hence it is apparent that juxtaposition of contradictory viewpoints speckle Yeats’ dramatic art and criticism. Indubitably, Yeats’ esotericism mediated with the innumerable influences he had garnered from far and wide. His close reading of *The Upanishads* and the serious drama of German and Scandinavian theatre along with his affinity with Expressionism and French Surrealism, and a penchant for continuous experimentation with new forms enabled him to envision theatre of estrangement. In a letter to T. Sturge Moore Yeats explained the motivation underlying his dramatic experimentation. His claim: “I always feel my work is not drama but the ritual of a lost faith” (VP I 526) accentuates the irrefutable connection between ritual ceremony and spirituality in his drama and by extension with the tenets of Romanticism. Thus Yeats developed a unique theory of drama which expressed clearly his abiding convictions and experiments in dramaturgy. He also exemplified his innovative attempts to revive the simplified yet abstractive drama. True to his Romantic propensity, he appreciated and rather re-introduced the Romantic imaginative streak into the dramatic form, making it mystic, unrealistic yet inimitably appealing and romantic. Moreover, his penchant for Celtic myths and legends, its heroic characters as also inclination towards the distinctive Noh Plays of Japan with its quintessential mystical and evocative milieu confirmed Yeats’ proclivity towards imagination and Romanticism. The world may dismiss his foray into experimental dramaturgy as anachronistic or of limited
significance, yet the criticism notwithstanding, Yeats emerged as an exponent of imaginatively distinct dramatic form. Yeats’s preference for the absolute amalgamation of minimalistic stage setting, stylized music and dance, the symbolic masked dancers, incantatory verses coupled with archetypal themes at once establishes him more closely with the Romantics rather than the modernists in the genre of drama.