The seventeenth century Italian scholar Vico fascinated William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) because of his insistence that the earliest and most primitive force in human history is the imagination; the language of poetry, of myth, is much older than the language of law and reason and debate. Throughout his career Yeats exploited the resources of his rich imagination using the language of poetry and indulging in myths. I. A. Richards did not like at least Yeats’s early poetry and declared that his early poetry was in the same line with the poetry of Walter De la Mare for both the poets reflect a general tendency to escape from the central issues of contemporary life. Richards comments: “A weakness of the modern Irish School (even at its best, in Mr Yeats) or of the exquisite poetry of De la Mare, may be that its sensibility is a development out of the main track. It is this which seems to make it minor poetry in a sense in which Mr. Hardy's best work Mr. Eliot’s The Waste Land is major poetry.”

Yeats is severely critical of Yeats’s later attitude towards the most active contemporary interests. After playing an active role to promote the Irish Literary Renaissance in the shape of developing a national Irish theatre, Yeats, writes Richards, “made a more violent repudiation not merely of current civilization, a favour of a supernatural world.” Richards further observes that Yeats turned to a world of symbolic phantasmagoria, about which he was desperately uncertain. Richards is critical of Yeats; or his resort to trance and the effort to discover a new world-picture to replace that given by science. He finds Yeats’s poetry written before the publication of The Tower as unsatisfactory. Ezra pound however is not critical of the romanticism in Yeats’ early poems. He observes that it is perhaps the highest function of art that it should fill the mind with a noble profusion of sound and images, that it should furnish the life of the mind with such accompaniment and surrounding. However, he too appreciated Yeats’s poems of ‘Responsibilities’ more who, in his view, had at last become a modern poet. Eliot too did not acknowledge the young Yeats. Eliot shrewdly observes, “The kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all; it was only to be found in French. For this reason the young Yeats hardly existed for me until after my enthusiasm has been won by the poetry of the older Yeats.”

Yeats expresses what draws him to a poet, perhaps giving some insight into why this little poem was made and continues to move people, despite its simplicity.

Yeats’s early poems many of which reveal the unhappiness of his defeatist, unrequited love affair are ignored but these are still captivating and sustain the nineteenth century tradition of poetic creation. The poems like Dawn by the Salley Gardens, When You are Old, He Wishes for the cloths of Heaven, Never Give All the Heart, No Second Troy and several other poems which he wrote remembering Maud Gonne, the superbly beautiful woman with whom he fell in love when he first met her at the age of twenty three, remind the reader of the great poets like Shelley and Spenser. Yeats makes the best possible use of rhetoric in these poems and proves that being rhetorical or conventional does not essentially make you write bad poems. For example, a poem like No Second Troy which appeared in The Green Helmet And Other Poems (1910) and which Yeats wrote likening Maud Gonne to Helen of Troy amply suggests that rhetoric has its place in poetry. “Why should I blame her that she filled my days /With misery, or that she would of late/Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,/Or hurled the little streets upon the great/ Had they but courage equal to desire? /What could have made her peaceful with a mind / That nobleness made simple as a fire, / With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind /That is not natural in an age like this; /Being high and solitary and most stern? /Why, what could she have done, being what she is? / was there another Troy for her to burn?”

Yeats was deeply hurt when Maud Gonne married John Mac Bride, another revolutionary but No Second Troy is not all about dejection in love. The poem indicates Yeats’s dislike for violence which finds its best possible expression in The Second Coming. According to Andrew Sanders, “Yeats always professed to see the world as in a state of perpetual flux. He also suggested that poets should share that flux by recognizing that poetic language was shaped and adapted by the shifting structures of culture and society.” In the poems which Yeats wrote after 1900, he expands the range of his subject-matter to embrace these ‘shifting structures of culture and society.’ He repudiated all the Celtic Twilight’s ‘embroideries out of old mythologies’ in A Coat (Responsibilities) (1914). How-ever, his constant praise of Maud Gonne’s beauty and her love of the people whom he had begun to distrust: c- titudes; it spills over into poems published some years later in The Wild Swans at Coole (1919). In the jmes entitled Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921), The Tower (1928) and The Winding Stair and other cems (1933), the poems range in subject-matter from revolutionary politics to personal regret, from an evocation of an ideal past to prophecy, from private agonising over the process of ageing to a celebration of c-ural history. The Easter Rising of 1916 took Yeats by surprise. The revolutionaries he had come to despise attained heroic stature and it seemed to him that a terrible beauty was born in
Easter 1916 he wrote: All changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty is born. In the casual comedy, he, too, has been changed in his turn, transformed utterly. A terrible beauty is born. I write it out in a verse- Mac Donagh and Mac Bride And Connolly and Pearse Now and in time to be, Whenever green is worn, are changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty is born. "He sacrifices of the revolutionaries forced Yeats to write Easter 1916 though he still doubted the wisdom of the readers of the Easter Rising of 1916 for the Irish cause and the phrase 'terrible beauty' that he coined was meant to express his this ambiguity regarding revolution and sacrifice.

The poem A Prayer For My Daughter foreshadows the grim mood of Yeats's The Second coming. There is a great gloom in the poet's mind. His prayer for his daughter gains in strength against the threatening background which makes the appeal to custom and ceremony something more than mere nostalgia for an aristocratic past: "How but in custom and ceremony/Are innocence and beauty born?/ Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,/ And custom for the spreading laurel tree." According to A. Norman Jeffares, in such poems as In Memory of Major Robert Gregory, Easter 1916 and A Prayer for my Daughter, Yeats is able to write with authority, to blend his appreciation of beauty with a sense of the tragic rather than the pathetic elements of life, to give a significance to the ordinary events of life which his earlier poetry avoided, and to attain in the process a personal means of achieving public speech in poetry.

Yeats's sincerity finds searching expressions further in The Tower. As in Sailing to Byzantium, in The Tower too Yeats celebrates the glory of soul accepting at the same time the infirmity of old age: He questions: "What shall I do with this absurdity-/ /O heart, O troubled heart-this caricature/Decrepit age that has been tied to me/As to a dog's tail?" 10 Yeats finally resolves to acknowledge the power of the soul:"Now shall I make my soul /Compelling it to study/ In a learned school /Till the wrench of body /Slow decay of blood/ /Testy delirium /Or dull decrepitude/ Or what worse evil come." 11

Although Yeats rejected much of the new philosophy of the centuries which his life spanned, his later poetry proclaims the independence of the artist who creates and expounds a new spirituality References to mythology and Christianity, to Homer and Dante, to Rome, Byzantium, or the Quattrocento stand as points of reference within a new unity of vision which projects emblems of perfection and of perfections of the soul. His visions are not always serene. In the tense sonnet, Leda and the Swan, for example- the rape of Leda by a superb, mastering bird- he transfers the sense of violation from the half-willing woman to the long-term consequences of the rape: the future ruin of Troy and the murder of Agamemnon. Sexist and phallocentric the poem may be, but for Yeats the enactment of the joining of the human and the divine transforms the intimate into the public, the woman's violation into a wider human tragedy.

In Among School Children which gives us a brief vignette of Yeats as a 'sixty-year-old smiling public man', the poet deals with the subject of the relationship of matter and spirit. The poet is in complete control of the speaking voice, dictating its pace and pitch: "Labour is blossoming or dancing where / /The body is not bruised to pleasure soul, / Nor beauty born out of its own despair, / Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil/ O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossemor, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/ How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

As a craftsman, Yeats proves himself vigorously in such poems. Appreciating the poem John Wain talks of the questions raised in the poem and writes, "This series of questions is arranged as a movement away from the immediate and personal, towards the universal."

Yeats talked of the changeless permanence of art, as Shakespeare too had discussed it in some of his immortal sonnets, in Sailing to Byzantium. Yeats’ another poem Byzantium also focuses on the immortality of art which is contrasted with the gross sensuality of our physical existence. T. R. Henn writes that at the last the spirits unified and made triumphant by the art of the goldsmith or worker in mosaic, triumph over the limitations of the body, the Dolphin's mire and blood. The lines read: "Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood, / Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood, / The golden smithies of the Emperor / /Marbles of the dancing floor/ Break bitter furies of complexity,/ Those images that yet/ Fresh images beget/ That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea."

Yeats’ poems are to be understood and enjoyed as all other poems are to be understood and enjoyed without adhering to any particular critical principle pertaining to ideas and images and music. We cannot despise him simply because he did not write like Pound and Eliot. Graham Martin observes that "Like any great poet, Yeats offers many satisfactions, but there seem to me good grounds for rating the simple direct centrality of much of his work as the most lasting." 14 It was W. H. Auden who rightly understood the centrality of ‘Yeats’ work and the quality of his poetry to generate joy out of tragic situations. In Auden’s view, Yeats’ achievement is a tribute to the essential free spirit of man. His poetry, as in the case of all great poetry, enlarges our sensibility and enables us to live as sensitive human beings. Auden writes: "Follow, poet, follow right / To the bottom of the night,/With your unconstraining voice/ Still persuade us to rejoice/ With the farming of a verse/ Make a vineyard of the curse,/ Sing of human unsucces/ In a rapture of distress/ In the deserts of the heart/ Let the healing fountain start,/ In the prison of his days/Teach the free man how to praise."

References:
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7. W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry, p. 93-95
8. Ibid., p. 103
9. Ibid., p. xix
10. Ibid., p. 105
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12. Ibid., p. 130
13. Ibid., p. 154