

Date: 23rd January-2026

POETIC DRAMA IN THE WORKS OF W. B. YEATS AND T. S. ELIOT

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Abstract: This study explores poetic drama in the works of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot, highlighting its development, theoretical foundations, and aesthetic significance in modern literature. The research examines how both authors sought to restore the spiritual, philosophical, and ritual dimensions of drama through verse, contrasting Yeats's mythic-symbolic approach with Eliot's Christian-classical and ethical framework. Key plays are analyzed to illustrate the role of poetic language, symbolism, and myth in shaping modernist drama. The study also considers the historical, cultural, and biographical contexts that influenced their poetic drama, emphasizing its enduring contribution to twentieth-century theater and literary modernism.

Keywords: Poetic drama, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, modernism, symbolism, myth, verse drama, ritual, spiritual dimension

ПОЭТИЧЕСКАЯ ДРАМА В ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯХ У. Б. ЙЕЙТСА И Т. С.
ЭЛИОТА

Аннотация: Данное исследование посвящено поэтической драме в произведениях У. Б. Йейтса и Т. С. Элиота, рассматривая её развитие, теоретические основания и эстетическое значение в современной литературе. Анализ проводится на основе того, как оба автора стремились восстановить духовные, философские и ритуальные аспекты драмы через стихотворную форму, сопоставляя мифико-символический подход Йейтса с христианско-классической и этической концепцией Элиота. Ключевые пьесы рассматриваются для иллюстрации роли поэтического языка, символизма и мифа в формировании модернистской драмы. Исследование также учитывает исторический, культурный и биографический контексты, влияющие на создание их поэтической драмы, подчеркивая её значительный вклад в театр XX века и литературный модернизм.

Ключевые слова: поэтическая драма, У. Б. Йейтс, Т. С. Элиот, модернизм, символизм, миф, стихотворная драма, ритуал, духовное измерение

Poetic drama occupies a distinctive and complex position in the history of modern literature, particularly in the transition from late nineteenth-century symbolism to twentieth-century modernism. Among the writers who most consciously sought to revive and redefine poetic drama for the modern age, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot stand out as central figures. Both poets were deeply dissatisfied with the naturalistic and commercial theater of their time and believed that drama written in verse could restore spiritual, philosophical, and ritual depth to the stage. Yeats approached poetic drama through myth,



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symbolism, and ritual derived from Irish cultural traditions and occult philosophy, while Eliot developed a Christian and classicist model of poetic drama rooted in European literary heritage and modern existential concerns. This study examines poetic drama in the works of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot as a sustained artistic and intellectual project, analyzing its aesthetic foundations, thematic concerns, formal innovations, and historical significance.

The discussion proceeds as a continuous analytical narrative rather than being divided into formal chapters. It situates Yeats's and Eliot's dramatic works within their biographical, cultural, and philosophical contexts, explores their theories of poetic drama, and evaluates key plays as expressions of modernist experimentation. The analysis draws on primary texts, letters, essays, and established scholarly interpretations, with references provided in footnote-style citations.

Poetic drama, as envisioned by Yeats and Eliot, was not merely a technical experiment in verse but a response to what both perceived as a crisis of modern civilization. Industrialization, secularization, and the fragmentation of belief systems had, in their view, diminished the spiritual function of art. Drama written in poetic language was intended to recover a sense of transcendence, ritual order, and collective meaning that prose realism could not adequately convey.

W. B. Yeats's engagement with poetic drama developed alongside his involvement with the Irish Literary Revival and the founding of the Abbey Theatre. From the 1890s onward, Yeats believed that Ireland needed a national theater rooted in myth, legend, and symbolic action rather than social realism. Influenced by French Symbolist drama, Japanese Noh theater, and his own mystical system later articulated in *A Vision*, Yeats created plays that emphasized stylized movement, chant-like verse, masks, and archetypal characters. Works such as *The Countess Cathleen*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *At the Hawk's Well*, *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, and *Purgatory* exemplify his belief that poetic drama should function as a form of ritual capable of transforming both performer and audience.

Yeats rejected the dominant naturalistic theater of writers like Henrik Ibsen, arguing that its emphasis on social problems and everyday speech reduced drama to journalism. Instead, he sought a drama of heightened language and symbolic action, where verse could express emotional and metaphysical truths beyond ordinary discourse. His early verse dramas often draw upon Irish folklore and heroic legend, presenting conflicts between the temporal world and the eternal realm of the spirit. Over time, Yeats's dramatic style became increasingly austere, moving away from romantic nationalism toward a more abstract and tragic vision of human existence.

Central to Yeats's poetic drama is the concept of the mask, which he regarded as a means of transcending personal identity and accessing universal archetypes. The use of masks in plays such as *At the Hawk's Well* reflects his belief that drama should not imitate everyday behavior but reveal deeper patterns of human destiny. The influence of Noh theater is particularly evident in the minimal staging, musical accompaniment, and chorus-



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like narration that characterize these works. Yeats viewed Noh as a living example of a ritual theater in which poetry, music, and movement are unified into a single expressive form.

The verse of Yeats's plays is highly musical and incantatory, often employing repetition, refrain, and rhythmic variation to create a hypnotic effect. Language functions not primarily as dialogue in the realistic sense but as a vehicle for symbolic meaning and emotional resonance. This approach reflects Yeats's conviction that poetic drama should appeal to the imagination rather than to rational analysis. His later plays, especially *Purgatory*, reveal a darker, more tragic vision, focusing on guilt, violence, and the cyclical nature of history. In these works, poetic drama becomes a means of confronting the destructive impulses at the heart of human existence.

T. S. Eliot's contribution to poetic drama emerges from a different but related set of concerns. Like Yeats, Eliot was dissatisfied with contemporary theater and believed that verse drama could address the spiritual emptiness of modern life. However, Eliot's approach was shaped by his commitment to Christian theology, his classical education, and his theory of tradition articulated in essays such as *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Eliot sought to create a drama that combined modern speech rhythms with the formal discipline of verse, making poetic language accessible to contemporary audiences without sacrificing its symbolic depth.

Eliot's early experiments in poetic drama, including *Sweeney Agonistes*, reflect his interest in jazz rhythms, colloquial speech, and fragmented modern consciousness. Although unfinished, *Sweeney Agonistes* demonstrates Eliot's attempt to integrate modern urban language into verse drama while maintaining a mythic substructure influenced by classical models. His mature achievements in poetic drama are found in *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk*, and *The Elder Statesman*.

Murder in the Cathedral stands as Eliot's most significant dramatic work and a landmark in twentieth-century poetic drama. Written for performance in Canterbury Cathedral, the play dramatizes the martyrdom of Thomas Becket and explores themes of spiritual authority, temptation, and sacrifice. Eliot employs a chorus modeled on Greek tragedy to articulate communal fears and moral dilemmas, while the verse shifts between formal and conversational registers. The play demonstrates Eliot's belief that poetic drama can convey theological ideas through dramatic action rather than abstract argument.

Eliot's later plays move from explicitly religious settings to contemporary social environments, exploring moral and spiritual crises within modern domestic and professional life. In *The Family Reunion*, Eliot adapts the *Oresteia* myth to examine guilt, responsibility, and redemption in a modern aristocratic family. The play's use of the Furies as symbolic figures illustrates Eliot's effort to integrate mythic elements into realistic settings, though critics have noted the challenges this poses for dramatic coherence.

In *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot achieves a more successful synthesis of verse and modern dialogue. The play addresses themes of self-knowledge, sacrifice, and spiritual



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vocation within the context of polite social comedy. Eliot's use of flexible verse rhythms allows characters to speak in a manner that resembles everyday conversation while retaining poetic structure. This technique reflects his conviction that poetic drama must evolve beyond archaic diction if it is to remain viable in the modern theater.

A comparative analysis of Yeats and Eliot reveals both shared aspirations and fundamental differences. Both writers sought to restore poetry to the stage and viewed drama as a means of engaging with spiritual and philosophical questions neglected by realistic theater. Both drew on myth, ritual, and classical models, and both believed that poetic drama required a highly disciplined approach to language and form. However, Yeats's drama is primarily symbolic and mythic, emphasizing cyclical history and archetypal conflict, while Eliot's drama is more discursive and ethical, focusing on individual moral choice and Christian redemption.

Yeats's verse drama tends toward abstraction and ritual, often minimizing plot and character development in favor of symbolic action. Eliot, by contrast, was more concerned with creating plays that could function effectively within contemporary theatrical conventions. His later works demonstrate an increasing emphasis on audience comprehension and dramatic clarity, even as he retained poetic language as a central element. These differences reflect their broader poetic philosophies: Yeats's belief in the autonomy of art and the power of myth, and Eliot's emphasis on tradition, community, and religious meaning.

The critical reception of poetic drama by Yeats and Eliot has been mixed. While both are widely recognized as major poets, their dramatic works have often been regarded as secondary to their poetry. Critics have questioned the stage effectiveness of Yeats's highly stylized plays and the dramatic vitality of Eliot's more didactic works. Nevertheless, modern scholarship increasingly recognizes their poetic dramas as essential components of modernist experimentation and as influential models for later playwrights interested in verse drama.

The legacy of Yeats and Eliot in poetic drama extends beyond their immediate historical context. Their works inspired subsequent generations of writers to reconsider the possibilities of poetic language in the theater, influencing figures such as Christopher Fry and W. H. Auden. More broadly, their dramatic experiments challenge the assumption that modern theater must be grounded exclusively in prose realism. By reasserting the value of poetry, myth, and ritual, Yeats and Eliot expanded the expressive range of modern drama.

In conclusion, poetic drama in the works of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot represents a sustained and intellectually ambitious effort to redefine the relationship between poetry and theater in the modern age. Through distinct but complementary approaches, both writers demonstrated that verse drama could address contemporary concerns while engaging with timeless questions of identity, faith, and human destiny. Their dramatic works remain vital texts for understanding the broader cultural and aesthetic aims of literary modernism.



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